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FREDRIC BROWN

DEATH *has many doors*

A SWELTERING
CHICAGO NIGHT—
A BRUTAL KILLER
WAITS

Complete & Unabridged



DEATH HAS MANY DOORS

Fredric Brown

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Synopsis

Fifth in the Ed and Am series, but last for several years (Brown worked on other projects from '52—58.) Having opened their own detective agency, Ed and Am start by taking cases passed along by former employer Starlock. One day a girl walks into their door, in fear of murder caused by Martians. The pair don't take her too seriously... until she winds up dead.

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Death hath so many doors to let out life.

BEAUMONT-FLETCHER

THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

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Chapter 1

IT WAS hotter and muggier than most August days in Chicago. I was sitting at the desk in the outer office—it was supposed to be for a secretary if we ever got one—poking a typewriter with one finger, trying to get out a letter to a finance company on Hunter & Hunter Detective Agency letterhead. We'd solicited them for skip tracing, which means finding people who've skipped town with automobiles they haven't paid for, and they wanted our terms in writing. The letter was going slowly; I saw that unless we could afford a secretary pretty soon I'd better learn how to use at least two fingers for typing.

The outer door opened a few inches and I looked at it. It closed again. But there weren't any footsteps outside; someone was standing there undecided. He'd opened the door a few inches and then he'd changed his mind and pulled it shut, but he hadn't changed his mind completely because he was still standing there.

A client, maybe. If it was, I hoped he'd come in. I was tempted to go to the door and invite him in.

But if you're operating a respectable agency, and we were trying to, you can't make like a South State Street used-clothing salesman and pull a hesitating prospect in by the arm. So I went back to my typing. And did even worse at it; knowing that someone was standing there listening to the clicking of the keys, I was self-conscious and embarrassed about the long intervals between clicks.

The door opened again, three inches. I stopped typing and looked at it to see what was going to happen. For about seven seconds nothing happened. Then the door opened the rest of the way and a girl came in.

She was tallish for a girl, about five feet eight. She had red hair and everything that should go with it. I wouldn't quite say she was beautiful, but she'd do until someone beautiful came along. She had a saucy, tilted nose and just a hint of freckles, but I'm repeating; I've already said she had everything that should go with red hair. She had a figure that was just right for her height; most tall girls tend either to be too slim or to be built like Amazons. She was feminine, too, from the nylon that showed at the tips of her open-toed shoes to the absurd little hat on top of that gorgeous hair. In age, she might have been anywhere from eighteen to twenty-five.

There was only one thing wrong with the picture. She wasn't well enough dressed to look like a client. I don't mean that she was badly dressed or shabby, but her clothes were a long way from being expensive; they didn't

look like money. I am no connoisseur of women's clothes and, personally, I don't care what kind they wear, if any, but I can tell expensive clothes from inexpensive ones. This girl didn't make over thirty or forty dollars a week. If she wanted any work done that took over a day or two, she wouldn't be able to afford it, even at the quite moderate rates we were charging.

I stood up and came around the desk as she came in, but I let her speak first.

"Is Mr. Hunter in?" Her voice was nice.

"Both Mr. Hunters," I said. "I'm Ed Hunter. The other one is Ambrose Hunter, my uncle. He's here too." I glanced toward the door of the inner office. Uncle Am was in, all right, but like as not asleep with his feet on the desk; he'd got into a poker game last night and had been put until almost four o'clock in the morning.

"I guess either one of you will do," she said. "It's about something I'd like you to do for me."

"A case, you mean?" I asked her. If she did, I'd let Uncle Am do the talking, but before I bothered him I thought I might as well make sure she wasn't selling magazine subscriptions or collecting donations for a home for indigent mice or something.

But she nodded in answer to my question so I went to the door of the inner office and knocked on it to give Uncle Am a chance to wake up and get his feet down before I opened the door and turned to the girl.

"This way, Miss—?"

"Doerr," she said. "Sally Doerr."

I followed her in and made the introduction. I said, "You don't mind if both of us listen to what you have to say, do you, Miss Doerr? If we can accept your case, either or both of us may work on it, so it may save time if we both get the facts right away."

She nodded again and sat down in the chair Uncle Am was holding for her. He looked at me over her shoulder and made a funny face and then winked. I didn't know why, then.

He went back behind his desk and sat down. I took a chair and pulled it up at the side, where I could watch the girl. She was definitely worth watching; I suppose that was my real reason for horning in on the interview.

Nothing happened right away except that Sally Doerr opened her handbag and got out a cigarette. I leaned over and lighted it for her.

Uncle Am cleared his throat and started the ball rolling by saying, "Well, Miss Doerr?" He smiled at her, the smile making his round face look like that of a cheerful, middle-aged cherub—if you can picture a cherub with a scraggly brown mustache.

"I—I need someone to protect me, Mr. Hunter," she said. "Someone is trying to kill me."

"Do you know who, and why?"

"Well—in a way, yes. But one trouble is, Mr. Hunter, I haven't a lot of

money. I've got a hundred dollars with me, and I can get about another hundred if I have to, but—I'm afraid that may not be very much."

It sounded like a lot to me, more than I'd expected her to have. But if by protection she meant a twenty-four-hour-a-day bodyguard service, it wouldn't cover a very long period.

Uncle Am said, "Let's not go into the financial angle until we know more about the rest of it, Miss Doerr. First, tell me, have you been to the police about this?"

"Yes, but they said they couldn't do anything. I—I don't think they believed me. They wouldn't even listen to all that I had to tell them."

That didn't sound too good, but it could happen all right if she got the wrong man on a busy day and the start of her story didn't sound too good.

But Uncle Am looked at me before he looked back at the girl. "Who, Miss Doerr, do you think is going to try to kill you?"

"Martians."

"Martians? You mean—men from Mars, the planet Mars?"

She nodded, and that was that. We'd wasted ten minutes on a psycho.

Uncle Am sighed and his swivel chair creaked. "I'm afraid, Miss Doerr, that we won't be able to help you either."

She leaned forward and I saw how suddenly frightened her eyes were. But she kept her voice calm. "You think I'm crazy. That's it, isn't it?"

It was a toughie, and I wondered how Uncle Am would manage to answer it. He did all right. "It's not my business to judge that, Miss Doerr. For all I know, you may be right. But if you are, we'd be taking your money under false pretenses if we offered to protect you. You see—"

He smiled wryly. "You see, we're just run-of-the-mine private detectives; we're not trained or equipped to protect you against any such—uh—esoteric menace, even if it exists."

"You could *try*. And I don't care whether you believe me or not, if you'll only try."

"Miss Doerr, I'm afraid we can't."

"But it's just for a short time. And I've really got a hundred dollars with me. If I pay—"

Uncle Am shook his head slowly. "Money isn't the reason, Miss Doerr. Uh—may I ask how you happened to choose us, instead of a larger agency?"

It took me a second to figure out why he'd asked that. There wasn't any way we could have been chosen at random; we'd been in business only a few weeks, and, while we had a telephone, it was too new for us to be listed in the classified section of the phone book. The only jobs we'd got thus far were from companies, mostly finance companies, whom we'd solicited for work.

She said, "A Mr. Starlock, of the Starlock Detective Agency, recommended you. I picked his agency out of the phone book and went to him. He said he was too busy, but he gave me your address and recommended you very highly. He said that both of you used to work for him before you started your own

business.”

That explained it, all right. Ben Starlock had passed the buck to us, as a gag. He knew both of us well enough to know we wouldn't take her money to protect her from Martians. There are plenty of detective agencies in Chicago that would.

Uncle Am said, “I see, Miss Doerr. Well, I'm sorry, but—”

She hadn't given up yet. “Mr. Hunter, do you think it's fair of you not even to admit a *possibility*, however slight, that I'm not insane?”

That was another toughie, but Uncle Am handled it. He said, “I'm not even implying that you're insane, Miss Doerr. I definitely think you are mistaken. Just as, for example, I believe that people who believe in ghosts are mistaken, although plenty of quite sane people believe in them.” He shrugged. “Maybe I'm wrong on both counts. Maybe there are ghosts. Maybe there are Martians operating on Earth. But if we don't believe in them—if we don't have faith in what our client tells us—it would be dishonest for us to take that client's money, or to accept him as a client in the first place. Don't you see that?”

“But if I *pay* you, why do you care whether you believe me or not?”

Uncle Am sighed again. “I'm afraid we do care, Miss Doerr. I'm sorry, but—definitely—we can't accept the case.”

Suddenly she cried. Not violently, not even aloud, but there were tears running down her cheeks. She dabbed at them with a foolish little handkerchief and stood up. She ran toward the doorway and through it. She closed the door after her, but she didn't slam it.

I looked at Uncle Am and he looked at me. He said, “The poor kid. I wish we could—”

I didn't know exactly what he was going to wish, but I got up and started for the door. I said, “Listen, Uncle Am, I'm going to catch her. I'm going to try to talk her into seeing a psychiatrist for her two hundred bucks.”

“Ed, be careful. Psychos are dangerous. You can get yourself in a hell of a —”

The last word was probably “jam,” but I was closing the outer door by that time and didn't hear it. Not that it would have stopped me. I knew that Uncle Am was right and that psychos are plenty dangerous to mess with, but I didn't intend to do any messing; I wasn't) going to touch Sally Doerr. I just wanted to help her; I just hated the idea of her rushing out of our office crying like that because we'd turned her down. Psychotic or not, I hate to see women cry.

The dial above the elevator door showed me that it was four floors up and the click of heels on the stairs a floor or so below proved that Sally wasn't on it. We're on the fifth floor so she must have decided to run down four flights rather than to wait.

I started after her and she must have heard my footsteps and slowed down; I caught up with her between the second floor and the first and she was walking normally by then.

I said, “Miss Doerr, I'm sorry if we hurt your feelings. Is there anything I

can do? Personally, I mean. I couldn't accept the case on my own if my uncle doesn't agree, so I don't mean that."

She looked at me levelly. She dried her eyes, but there was a damp spot on one cheek she'd missed. "I don't know what, Mr. Hunter."

Well, I didn't know either, outside of advising her to see a psychiatrist, and you can't bring up something like that suddenly and nakedly. You have to sneak up on a suggestion like that.

So I grinned at her, my Sunday grin. "How's about a drink and some conversation? Maybe neither of them will help, but they shouldn't hurt, either."

She smiled, a bit tremulously. "All right, Mr. Hunter."

"Make it Ed," I told her. She made it Ed, and I was calling her Sally by the time we were sitting at a table in a cocktail bar a block away and had a pair of cool Collinses between us.

I figured that a good first step was to find out—or try to—just how far off the beam she was.

"Tell me something about yourself, Sally," I said. "Background. Where you were born and when, and what you do for a living and who your folks are and what you eat for breakfast. Nothing about Martians. Save them for later; tell me about yourself first."

"You don't believe there are Martians, do you?"

"No, I don't. But forget that for a while. Answer what I asked you."

"I'm twenty-two, Ed. I was born in a town in Colorado that you've never heard of, Seco. That means 'dry' in Spanish. It isn't much of a town any more, only two or three thousand people. But when I was born there it was a mining center and had eight or ten thousand people. I lived there until I was twelve; my parents died then."

"Both at once?"

"The same night. My mother got awfully sick—we found out later it was acute appendicitis—one evening. We lived about ten miles out of town and there was a storm that evening and the telephone wires were down, so Dad got out the car and started into the storm to get a doctor from town. They were mountain roads and he went off a high embankment just two miles from home and was killed. I guess he was worried and was driving too fast for a slippery road in a storm. They didn't find the car until the next morning. And Mother died of a ruptured appendix before then."

She spoke of it calmly enough, but it could have been a terrible experience for a girl of twelve, especially if she'd been alone. I asked her if she had been.

"Oh, no. We did have a doctor there before my mother died, but he got there too late to save her. And my sister was there, and neighbors. You see, Dad left about eight o'clock in the evening and when he wasn't home by midnight we knew something must have happened. Mother was in awful pain by then. And the storm was over so Dorothy—that's my sister; she's two years younger than I am—ran to the nearest neighbor's while I stayed with Mother.

The telephones were working again by that time so they phoned to get a doctor out from town and then came over and stayed with us.”

Well, that had been bad, I thought, but not as bad as I’d first pictured it—a little girl alone in a house all night with a dead mother and her father missing. As it *had* happened, with neighbors and a doctor there, it wasn’t any worse than a lot of kids go through.

“You have just one sister, then?” I asked. “No brothers?”

“Yes, just Dorothy. She’s my nearest relative, I guess.”

“You guess? You don’t know?”

She laughed a little. “Well, she *is* my nearest relative, at least by blood. But I have foster parents—guardians—who adopted me and my sister. They’re distant relatives of my mother’s. I guess they’re about fourth cousins, or maybe fifth.”

“Do you still live with them?”

She shook her head. “My sister does. She’s going to the University of Chicago and so she’s still dependent on them and lives with them. I went to college one year but that was enough for me. I took a job and got myself a place of my own.”

“What work do you do?”

“Stenographic work. For a big insurance company, the Halstead Mutual. But I’m on vacation this week.” She smiled ruefully. “And I’m too broke to go anywhere I really wanted to go, so I just decided to stay in Chicago, hot as it is here. Besides—” Her eyes got a little wide and scared and I had a hunch that the Martians were coming, or would be if I didn’t sidetrack them first. And I wanted the rest of the background before we got to the Martians. So I tossed in a question.

“Are you on good terms with your sister and your guardians, Sally?”

“Oh, sure. But I don’t like to live there. And I don’t like their son Dickie, and I don’t like Uncle Ray.”

“Who’s Uncle Ray?”

“My foster mother’s brother, Ray Wernecke. He’s a lush and—I just don’t like him. I think he used to have a brilliant mind before he started pickling it in alcohol. And Dickie—” She shuddered a little.

I took a stab in the dark. “Makes passes?”

She threw back her head and laughed. “Lord, no. He’s eleven years old. But a quiz kid. One of these obnoxious brats who knows everything and has to keep showing off. Probably has a tremendous I. Q., but—well, he gives me the creeps.”

“I’ve known kids like that,” I said.

“None as bad as Dickie. And I hope you’re spared knowing him.”

“Another Tom Collins?”

“Why not?”

And there wasn’t any reason why not that I could see, so I ordered two more for us. It was cool and air-conditioned in the cocktail bar and outside

you could have toasted bread by leaving it in the sun.

"But your sister," I asked, "doesn't mind living with the—what's the name of your guardians?"

"Stanton. Gerald and Eva Stanton. Oh, Dorothy gets along with them all right. She'd rather have a place of her own, like mine, if she was supporting herself, but she's sold on the idea of finishing college so she hasn't any choice. And the Stantons are all right. It's just Uncle Ray and Dickie."

"They're putting her through college? The Stantons, I mean?"

"Yes. I could have finished college if I wanted to. They've treated us wonderfully."

"You still see them regularly?" I asked. I was wondering why she hadn't gone to them with her delusion instead of to the police and then to a private detective agency.

"Oh, sure. I go out there fairly often, every week or two. And I see Dorothy oftener than that because she drops in when she's in town; we have dinner together and see a show. Or go to the beach. We both love to swim."

"This Ray Wernecke lives with the Stantons?"

"Yes. He pays board, of course. He's got a regular income from some patents."

"He doesn't work?"

"Not unless you call playing the horses work. And drinking."

"Do your guardians drink?"

"Oh, moderately, normally, like anybody else. They don't make a career of it. And Gerald—Dorothy and I call Gerald and Eva by their first names—is a buyer for a big department store and he wears glasses and eats bacon and eggs for breakfast every morning, and what else do you want to know?"

I grinned at her. "Whether you think you could stand another drink."

"Well, maybe a third wouldn't hurt me. But no more. What time is it?"

"A little after three," I said. "Mind if I make a phone call? I'll order the drinks while I'm gone."

I went to the phone booth and called the office. Uncle Am answered.

"Anything up?" I asked him. "Any reason why I should come back?"

"Not a damn thing, Ed, except—listen, kid, you're going to get yourself in a jam. Psychos are dangerous."

"I'm keeping a table between us," I said. "But I kind of like the gal."

"Martians or no?"

"We haven't got around to Martians yet." And because I knew it would annoy him I said, "We're just discussing sex."

"For God's sake, Ed. Listen, I was kidding when I said there wasn't anything doing. We've got three cases all at once and every one of them is in a hurry. So you better get back here quick."

"Swell. And I was kidding when I said we were discussing sex, so don't worry. I'll be a good boy, Uncle Am. And I'll be seeing you sometime, but probably not this afternoon."

I hung up and ordered two more drinks on my way back to the table. Maybe it was the two drinks I'd already had, but Sally Doerr looked a lot prettier than I'd remembered her to be. I almost regretted the promise I'd just made. Almost, but not quite; making passes at a psycho can be as dangerous as playing baseball with a hand grenade.

So I kept sex out of the conversation. But neither, during the third drink, did we get around to Martians or murder; I found myself telling Sally about me. About how, after my father had died, I'd gone with my uncle to the carnival for a season, and how we'd happened to come back to Chicago and get jobs with the Starlock Agency—largely because Uncle Am had been an operative before he'd become a carney—and how we'd recently started our own agency and hadn't really made the grade yet, but neither were we quite broke.

I told it in a little more detail than that, of course; our glasses were empty by the time I finished. I didn't really want a fourth drink just then, but I suggested one.

"Thanks, no, Ed. I'm feeling the three I've had. And I like to drink, but not too much. Maybe I'd better have a little fresh air."

The air outside was hot and not nearly as fresh as the conditioned air in the cocktail bar, but we walked a few blocks. We started to pass a movie and then didn't because it was showing Betty Hutton in *Annie Get Your Gun* and because a sign said that it was thirty degrees cooler inside.

It was seven o'clock when we got out so we ate chow mein and then it was eight. We had another couple of drinks, this time at a place where we could listen to music and dance a little, and then it was half past eleven and no Martians had shown up yet. I'm afraid that I'd forgotten about them.

I took Sally home and she had an inexpensive but fairly nice little two-room housekeeping apartment on East Walton Place. Third floor of a four-story building. Living room with a kitchenette in one corner, and a bedroom.

I turned down an offer of food, but when it came out that there was enough whisky left in a bottle in the cupboard for one final drink apiece I agreed to help her get rid of it. It was hot and muggy in the little apartment, even with the windows up. Sally made us tall drinks with soda and ice cubes, and they were cool and tasted good. It had been a nice evening.

Then, halfway through my drink, I looked at Sally Doerr and saw that she was crying again, quietly, as she had in our office that afternoon. The Martians were with us again.

I swore silently to myself, wishing I'd had sense enough to leave her at the door so I could have avoided this. It was going to be embarrassing now, just when I'd have to leave. If the Martians were going to invade, they should have come earlier, while I had lots of time to talk her out of them.

But—well, here it was, and I couldn't just sit there and watch her cry and pretend that she wasn't.

"What's the matter, Sally?" I asked her.

“Ed, I’m afraid. I’ve felt safe while you’re with me—and it’s been wonderful of you and I’ve managed not to think or talk about what’s going to happen. But now—”

“Sally,” I said, “there’s nothing to be afraid of. There aren’t any Martians—not on Earth, anyway. And *if* there are any on Mars they can’t hurt you—they’re a lot of miles away. And besides, why would they want to?”

“I don’t know, Ed. I wish I did know. Then—well, it wouldn’t be so horrible if I knew *why*, what they have against me. But all I know is that they’re going to kill me.”

“Sally, you’re mistaken. You’re imagining the whole thing. You’re not really in danger.”

“That’s easy for you to say, Ed. You don’t know—Listen, Ed, if you’ll stay here tonight, just tonight—you can stay here in this room and I’ll sleep in the bedroom—I’ll give you that hundred dollars.”

She really had a hundred dollars, too—or a roll of bills that looked like a hundred; she took it out of her handbag and tried to hand it to me.

I said, “Put it back, Sally. I can’t. Honestly, I can’t. Please don’t ask me to.”

She saw that I meant it and the money went back, but she didn’t stop crying. The poor kid, I thought. Those Martians and her danger from them were real to her—so real that she was offering me all the money she had just to guard her for one night. And she’d be scared to death all night long after I left. Whether you’re sane or not, that’s no fun.

I said, “Sally, have you ever been to a psychiatrist? Honestly, that’s what you should spend your money on. The money you’ve got and whatever you can raise. Those Martians, Sally—they’re in your mind.”

She dabbed at her eyes and then looked at me. “Ed, you’re not fair, just as your uncle wasn’t. You won’t even admit the *possibility* that I’m not mistaken. Will you?” She had me, there. I sighed and said, “All right, Sally, maybe I’m not fair. But are you? Will you admit the possibility that you need a psychiatrist?”

“I know I don’t, but—well, I’ll admit the possibility.”

“Good girl,” I told her. “Tell you what. If I admit that you could be right, to the extent of playing watchdog in this room tonight—and I do mean in this room—will you promise that tomorrow you’ll go to a psychiatrist? And use that money—because I’m not charging you—to start a course of treatments with him?”

“Yes, Ed.”

I’d almost hoped she wouldn’t agree, but there hadn’t been a second of hesitation. The fright went out of her eyes and she smiled at me, her lips trembling a little. She said softly, “You’re a wonderful guy, Ed Hunter.” I was thinking what a wonderful damned fool I’d made of myself.

The telephone was within reach of my chair and I picked it out of its cradle and gave the number of the rooming house where Uncle Am and I stay. It rang half a dozen times before anyone answered and then Uncle Am’s voice said

“Hello.” He’d probably been waiting up and listening for the phone to ring; six rings was just about the time it would take him to get from our room on the second floor downstairs to the phone in the hallway.

“This is Ed, Uncle Am. Sorry I didn’t call you sooner.”

“For God’s sake, kid. I thought the Martians had got you. Are you still with that crazy dame?”

I said, “I am, but it’s all right. I can’t explain now, but I won’t see you till tomorrow morning.”

“Ed, you’re nuts. Go out to the Brookfield Zoo and talk them into letting you sleep with the rattlesnakes; that’ll be a lot safer. My God, kid, I hope you know what you’re doing.”

I hoped so, too. But with Sally sitting there listening I couldn’t go into detail about the fact that I wasn’t sleeping with anyone, so I had to say, “I know what I’m doing and it’s all right but I can’t explain. I’ll tell you about it tomorrow.”

I thought he might worry a little less if he knew the address and the phone number, so I gave them to him and waited while he wrote them down.

He said, “Well, Ed, I’ve always heard there’s a Providence that watches over fools and drunkards. And maybe you’re sober—you sound like it—but you still qualify. Good night.”

“Night, Uncle Am. And don’t worry.”

I put the phone back into its cradle and turned around. Sally had gone into the bedroom while I was talking and now she was coming out again. She had a pistol in her hand.

Chapter 2

SHE CAME toward me with it and I tensed my muscles for a quick grab for the gun in case she got within reach before she stopped coming; then I saw that she wasn't aiming it at me and that her finger wasn't even inside the trigger guard.

"I think you'd better have this, Ed," she said. "I bought it yesterday, but I'm afraid I wouldn't know how to use it. And you would, if anything happened."

I took the gun out of her hand. My forehead felt wet from the sudden scare I'd had, and I mopped it with my handkerchief before I took a look at the pistol she'd handed me. It was a thirty-two caliber black automatic. The safety catch was on.

"It's loaded," Sally said. "Be careful." I was careful. I pulled out the magazine and then pulled back the slide to see if there was a cartridge in the chamber. There wasn't; the gun wouldn't have fired, not without jacking a cartridge from the magazine up into the chamber.

I wondered if she'd known that or if she'd thought the gun was ready to use. I looked up at her and asked, "What would you have done, Sally, if you'd wanted to shoot it at somebody?"

"Why, pulled the trigger. Isn't that all you're supposed to do?" She hadn't even known about the safety catch. I let it go at that; it was probably safer if she didn't know how to shoot the gun. So I said, "Sure, that's all you're supposed to do. All right, I'll keep the gun by me here."

I put the magazine back in, but I didn't jack a cartridge up into the chamber either. I'd be just as happy to have that gun not too easily shootable. I put it down beside the telephone.

I stood up and yawned; it started as a fake yawn but ended as a real one. I took off my suit coat and hung it over the back of a straight chair. I said, "It's after midnight, Sally, and I'll have to get up early. I'd better to get a little sleep. But don't worry; I sleep lightly and I'll wake up if anything happens. Door to the hallway locked?"

"I'll lock it." She did. "And that's the only door. There's no outer door from the bedroom. Just a window onto an airshaft. All right, Ed, you go to sleep. I'm not sleepy; I slept late this morning. So I'll read in bed awhile. Good night, Ed, and thanks—thanks an awful lot."

"Good night, Sally."

She stood there in the doorway a moment and I wanted to go over and kiss

her, and I knew, somehow, that she wanted me to. But I was afraid things wouldn't stop there if I did.

"You don't mind if I leave the door ajar, do you, Ed? There's only that airshaft window in the bedroom. It'll be stifling unless there's at least a little cross-ventilation."

"Okay, Sally. 'Night."

She left the bedroom door about six inches ajar and I could hear her moving around. I made myself as comfortable as I could without undressing; I took off my shoes and my tie and opened my collar. The chair I'd been sitting in was a comfortable overstuffed one and I pulled another chair in front of it to put my feet on. I turned out the lamp and tried to sleep.

For a long time, I couldn't. My thoughts went in circles.

But I must have dozed off eventually because I nearly jumped out of the chair when the phone rang beside me.

I grabbed it out of its cradle and said "Hello" into it before it occurred to me that maybe I shouldn't have. A friend or relative of Sally's might be justifiably surprised to have a man's voice answer her phone in the middle of the night. It might give Sally a tall job of explaining to do to somebody. Yes, the minute I answered the phone I realized that I shouldn't have. I should have called Sally instead.

There was the click of a phone hanging up at the other end of the line. I put my phone back and cursed myself for having been so stupid. And yet—I wondered why the person who had made the call had hung up, without even inquiring whether he had the right number.

I looked at the luminous dial of my wrist watch and saw that it was almost exactly two o'clock. The door to the bedroom was ajar and there was still a light on in there, but no sound. Either Sally had fallen asleep reading or she'd deliberately left a lamp on when she'd decided to sleep. She couldn't still be awake and not have heard the phone ring; she'd be at the door now asking what the call had been.

I decided I'd better tell her about it. If whoever had called had hung up because he'd thought it was a wrong number, he'd probably call back. In any case, since I'd made the blunder of answering, Sally should know about the call.

I called her name and walked over to the bedroom door and called it louder. There wasn't any answer.

I pushed the door a little more ajar and looked around it.

Sally Doerr was lying on the bed, naked. I started to pull my head back around the door before I called again, and then I realized with sudden shock that her eyes had been open. Wide open and staring upward at the ceiling. I went in and touched her body. It was cold. Very beautiful and very cold. Her breasts were lovely, but they did not rise and fall with breathing. There was no mark on her, anywhere. I went out, quietly, leaving the bedroom door open, and went to the phone. I thought a minute before I picked it up and then I gave

the home phone number of Captain Bassett of Homicide. He's a close friend of mine and Am's. We've done a couple of pretty important favors for him, too.

After a while his voice answered, sleepily. I said, "This is Ed Hunter, Frank. First, take down this address and apartment number." I gave it. "Got it," he said. "What's wrong?"

"There's a girl here, dead. It looks like natural death, but the circumstances are a little funny. There's no reason to call Homicide, officially. But I wonder if you'd come around and bring a medical examiner with you."

"Sure, Ed. Half an hour. And I'll call Doc Graham first, so he can be dressing while I am and we'll get there about the same time."

"Thanks, Frank," I said.

I put the phone down and stood there a minute wondering whether I should call Uncle Am, too. I decided there wasn't anything that he could do and that there wasn't any use bothering him. And anyway he'd be asleep by now and I'd have to let the phone ring till it woke Mrs. Brady, our landlady, and she wouldn't like that.

I went back into the bedroom and looked at Sally Doerr again. She was lying in a natural position except that one arm, her right one, was lying up over the headboard of the bed. As though, possibly, she'd been reaching for the chain of the floor lamp that stood there.

But if she'd reached for the pull-chain to turn off the lamp, her hand had never got there. The lamp still burned. There were two pillows under her head, as though she'd been reading, and a pocket-size reprint book lay on the bed beside her.

I glanced at the title of the book. It was *Life on Other Worlds*, by someone named H. Spencer Jones. Hell of a thing, I thought, for a girl worried about being killed by Martians to try to read herself to sleep with.

I went over to the window. It was open, but it opened onto a blank airshaft, a small one. I leaned out and looked up and down; there were windows above and below but no others on this level. Someone could conceivably have entered the room by lowering himself from the window above or climbing up the shaft from below. But there was no indication that anyone had. In fact, the window-sill gave proof to the contrary; there was a thin film of dust on it, about a one-day's accumulation for midsummer Chicago, and the dust hadn't been disturbed.

I thought of the possibility of poison, and I went back to the bed and looked on, around and even under it for any sign of a bottle or any box that might have contained pills or capsules. I looked on the dresser and then I went into the tiny bathroom and looked through the medicine cabinet. The only thing that looked like poison was a half full bottle of iodine and if Sally had died of poison, it hadn't been iodine. Iodine poisoning is unmistakable.

I thought of the possibility of electrical shock and I went around the head of the bed and studied the floor lamp that stood there, the lamp for which she

might have been reaching when she died. It looked all right to me. Perhaps foolishly, I touched the metal of it to see if I'd get a shock and I didn't. I pulled the chain and turned it off and then turned it back on again so I'd be leaving it as I found it.

It occurred to me that she might have been reaching back to tilt the shade to give herself better light for reading, so I lifted off the shade and looked at it. It was a rather unusual and handsome lampshade, nothing that came from a dime store. It was metallic and opaque, copper on the outside and aluminum inside. I'd thought it was made of solid metal and was surprised by its lightness as I lifted it off the lamp. Then I saw that it was stiff celluloid and that the copper and aluminum were metal foils glued to the inside and outside of the shade. I put it back at the same angle it had been before.

I went around the room once more looking for anything, anything at all, that might seem unusual or out of the way, but there was nothing.

Nothing unusual in the entire room except a dead, naked girl lying on the bed—a girl who had feared and expected that she was going to be murdered.

I went back into the living room and turned on the lamp out there. I put my shoes, tie and coat back on and then there didn't seem to be anything to do except wait till Bassett and the doctor got there.

Bassett was first. I let him in and took him to the open door of the bedroom. He whistled softly.

"*That* one," he said. "She's a psycho. She was down at the department yesterday, wanting to be protected against men from Mars. She wasn't dressed that way, though."

"Did you talk to her, Frank?"

"No, McClain got her. But I saw her while she was in his office." Bassett's tired eyes were going around the room as he talked, taking in every detail. "McClain stalled her and left her in there; he came out and asked me if I'd go out and talk to her family. They live out near Rogers Park and he knew I had an errand out that way anyway. So I talked to her guardian to find out if it was safe for her to run around loose, or if we ought to hold her for observation."

"What'd he say?"

"He said she wasn't crazy, that she had a good mind, but that she was rather suggestible and got wildish ideas once in a while and then got over them. He admitted this one was a little wilder than most and said he'd talk to her about it and see if he thought she should see a psychiatrist. Well, that was okay with us. And if that her only delusion, there are plenty of people walking around Chicago with worse ones. Hell, I know a guy who—"

"So you let her go, huh?"

"Sure. I phoned McClain and he said okay, if her guardian felt that way about it, he wasn't going to hold her. As long as a delusion is harmless, what the hell. There are more crazy people outside of asylums than in them, and as long as they get along okay—"

"Think we better phone her guardian? His name's Stanton—but you know

that, if you talked to him. Has he got a phone?"

"Sure; I used it to call McClain. But Doc Graham'll be here in a few minutes. Might as well wait till he's looked her over; then we'll know better what to tell Stanton, and a few minutes can't matter. Were you in the room with her when it happened?"

I shook my head. "I was in the chair out in the other room."

He looked at me a bit skeptically, but he asked, "Asleep or awake?"

"Both. I don't know which I was at the time she died. I was there from around midnight until just before I called you—that would have been about two o'clock. At a guess, I was awake for an hour and then dozed off for the second hour. And all I know about when she died is that it was after twelve and before two. I came in here at two, and she was dead then."

"How come you came in? Get lonesome?"

I was telling him about the phone call that had wakened me when there was a knock at the door. We let Dr. Graham in. Bassett told him what the score was and he went into the bedroom and shut the door. Bassett and I sat out in the living room.

"Let me start at the beginning, Frank," I told him. "I just met the girl this afternoon so there isn't too much to tell."

I told him the whole thing, starting with Sally Doerr walking into our office. When I got to the part about my agreeing to spend the night in her living room, and for free—either way you looked at it—my reasons sounded a bit silly—even to me. But Bassett, whether he believed that part or not, didn't stop me.

When I came to the part about finding her and phoning him right away, he asked me if I'd touched or moved anything, either before or after making the phone call.

I said, "I touched her, of course, just enough to make sure she was dead. I touched the lamp and turned it off and then back on, just to make sure she hadn't got a shock from it, but it's okay. I looked all around the bedroom and the bathroom, but didn't move anything."

"You touched nothing else?"

"Only my own things. I had my shoes, coat and tie off; I put them back on while I was waiting for you."

The bedroom door opened and Graham came out. He said, "No sign of anything. I'd say it was simple heart failure if I knew she had a weak heart. Know anything about her medical history? Know who her doctor was?"

"I'll find out," Bassett said. "Can you stick around a few minutes?"

The medical examiner nodded. Bassett looked up a number in the phone book and dialed it. While he was waiting for an answer he glanced at the doctor. "Want to make a guess as to the time of death?"

"As long as it's only a guess. I'd say at least two hours."

Then, I thought, Sally must have died while I was still awake, almost as soon as she'd got undressed and had lain down on the bed to read. Most of the

time I'd been sitting there guarding her, I'd been guarding a dead woman.

I heard Bassett ask for Mr. Stanton and then talk to him briefly. He jotted something down in his notebook.

When he cradled the phone, he said, "Stanton's coming right away. He said Sally did have a bad heart and he gave me the name and phone number of the specialist who was treating her for it. I'll call him."

"Better have him come around," Graham said. "If she was his patient, it'll be better if he signs the certificate."

Bassett made the call. When he'd finished, Graham said, "You called him Dr. Kerry. First name Walter?"

"Right. You know him, Doc?"

"Not personally, but by reputation. He's a good man; one of the best cardiac men in the field."

"Good," Bassett said. "Anyway, he's coming. And he confirmed what Stanton told us. Sally's been his patient for years. An enlarged heart, pretty dangerous. He wasn't surprised that she'd died suddenly."

Graham nodded. "If he still thinks that after he's seen her there's no reason for an autopsy. Unless—" He looked at me. "Unless there's some special circumstance—"

I opened my mouth to say that Sally had been afraid she'd be killed tonight—and then I remembered who she thought was going to do the killing, and I closed my mouth again.

Bassett said, "Maybe you'd better beat it, Ed. Might be embarrassing for you, under the circumstances, when Stanton gets here, especially if he brings his wife. *I'm crazy* enough to believe you were sleeping out here, but I don't know how anybody else would take a story like that."

"Maybe you're right," I admitted.

"You going home? You'd probably better, in case I want to get in touch with you for any reason. Such as if this heart specialist who's coming is doubtful about signing the certificate. If that happens, we've got to consider it a case until after an autopsy, and we'll want your statement down at headquarters. Otherwise, if it's a natural death, all this is unofficial. If you don't hear from me tonight, though, drop in at my office in the morning. I'll tell you what gave, if you're interested."

I'd be interested all right. I said, "Okay. Thanks a lot, Frank. And I'll head right home and stay there in case you want me."

I beat it, and went home. It was after three o'clock by the time I got there and I tried to get into bed without waking Uncle Am, but it didn't work.

He opened one eye sleepily and asked me what the hell, so I had to tell him the whole thing. By that time he was wide awake and we talked it over. It was half past four when I finally got to bed and it must have been at least six by the time I got to sleep.

The alarm woke me at seven, and I remember that I turned it off and lay there for a minute thinking that I'd had a hell of a bad dream before I realized

that it had really happened. Sally Doerr had been a nice kid, psycho or no, and she was dead.

I was waiting for Bassett in the outer room at Homicide when he came in at nine o'clock.

He took me into his office. "All okay, Ed," he said. "All washed up. Dr. Kerry signed the certificate and neither he nor Graham has the slightest doubt that the girl died of heart failure. Kerry said it was something that could have happened at any time and without having to have any special immediate cause."

"But it would have been more likely," I said, "if there *was* some special immediate cause."

"Kerry admitted that. Fright, shock, over-exertion. But hell, Ed, you were there. It couldn't have been any of those things without your knowing about it."

"I guess not," I said.

Bassett bit the end off a cigar and stuck it in his mouth. He said, "The Stantons took it okay, by the way. I had to explain about your being there, and why, to account for her having been found before morning, but they took that okay too. And Stanton must have taken your story at face value, because he told me to thank you for what you tried to do for Sally."

I'd have felt just as happy if he hadn't thanked me, but I didn't say so. I just said, "There's nothing I can do?"

"Don't know what, Ed. Or why you'd want to."

"I liked the girl. That's all."

"Well, there's nothing you can do. Not even a deposition, since it's a natural death. By the way, Mrs. Stanton explained one thing that puzzled me a little. Sally always slept raw; she hated to wear pajamas or anything else to sleep in, even in cold weather."

"So do I," I said. "Anything more than shorts, anyway."

"Well, it explains why she lay down to read dressed—or undressed—that way. But with the door ajar and you in the next room either she trusted you a lot or else she hoped you *would* stroll over to the door and look in."

I'd been wondering about that myself, but I didn't want to talk about it. Anyway, it did me a hell of a lot of good to wonder, now.

I thanked Frank for coming around and taking care of things, and left. I went on to our office.

Uncle Am was there, dozing, with his feet up on the desk in the inner office. The letter I'd been writing to the finance company, quoting rates, was still in the typewriter in the outer office and I went back to hunting keys. Uncle Am came to the door. He said, "Good God, kid, I thought a machine gun was going out here, with the keys hitting that fast."

"Can you do it any better?"

"I'm damned if I can do it any worse. Listen, Ed, you had less sleep than I did last night. Why don't you come in here and take a nap, and I'll finish

that.”

So I did, and he did. Anyway, I tried to sleep. But I kept thinking about Sally Doerr and how she’d died and the more I thought the less I liked what I was thinking.

But I did get about an hour’s nap, finally.

That afternoon we got a case. Nothing important, a lawyer wanted a man found because his signature was needed on a quitclaim so a property deal could go through. The leads he could give us were sum and ancient and they petered out on me, but it killed the afternoon and added a small item to our accounts receivable, even if it didn’t do our client any good.

In the evening paper I found a notice of Sally Doerr’s funeral, the next day. I found a florist shop that was still open and ordered some flowers sent to the mortuary mentioned in the notice.

The next day was Saturday. Nothing happened.

Sunday we slept late and then sat around reading the Sunday papers. At two o’clock we went down for some lunch and when we finished eating, Uncle Am said, “Well, Ed, how do you want to kill the afternoon? Should we see a show, maybe?”

I said, “I’m going out to talk to Gerald Stanton.”

“Who’s he, Ed? Name sounds familiar but I can’t place it.”

“Sally Doerr’s guardian.”

“Good Lord, kid. What do you want to see him for?”

“I don’t know, exactly,” I admitted. “I just want to talk to him.”

“I think you’re goofy. That’s all washed up. I know you’ve been thinking about it, but hell, kid, there’s nothing to think about. The girl died of heart failure.”

“Probably.”

“Probably, hell. She did. Well, if you want to go see this Stanton, go ahead. Want me to trail along?”

I shook my head. No use, I figured, tangling Uncle Am in this—not unless I found out there was really something to tangle in.

Since I hadn’t anything else to do with my time, I didn’t bother phoning first. I took the el out to Rogers Park Station and walked from there to the address the phone book gave for Gerald Stanton. It turned out to be a flat in a three-story building of six flats. The Stantons were in Number Three on the second floor. There wasn’t a buzzer-lock on the inner door so I walked up and knocked on the door of the flat.

It opened and a tall, thin man with blond, wavy hair said, “And what can I do for you?” His voice was just a trifle thick; his eyes didn’t seem to focus on me perfectly. He looked as though he’d had a lot to drink but had had a lot of practice in holding it. He seemed to be about forty.

“I’d like to talk to Mr. Stanton,” I said. “Is he home?”

“Due any moment. Come in if you wish to wait. Our house is your house and all that sort of rot. Take a chair. And will you have a drink? Yes, you

will.”

This, I knew, must be Ray Wernecke, alias Uncle Ray, the lush. And if I wanted to find out anything from him I knew I’d better take the drink he offered. Lushes are that way; they’ll talk their heads off if you drink with them, and they’re insulted and sulk if you don’t.

So I said sure, thanks. The bottle was already there, on the coffee table. A medium-priced brand of whisky. Wernecke got me a glass from the bureau and started to pour whisky into it. He poured it as though it were water and although I started asking him to stop before it was half full he went right ahead and filled the glass—an eight-ounce tumbler—almost to the brim before he handed it to me.

I needed a drink that size, and of raw whisky without even a chaser in sight, about as much as I needed a pair of handcuffs on my ankles, but I took it and thanked him. I took a short sip to show my good intentions.

I sat down on the sofa and he took a chair facing me and picked up the glass he’d been drinking from.

“Lonesome,” he said. “Nobody here but Dickie, and Dickie doesn’t drink. But he’s only eleven. Can’t blame him. Didn’t drink myself when I was eleven, except maybe a hot toddy when I had a cold. But I used to love those hot toddies. Still do, once in a while. You want a hot toddy? Drink up, and I’ll make you one.”

“Thanks,” I said, “but I’ll work on this awhile.” I took another sip to prove I was working on it.

“But I was telling you why Dickie doesn’t drink. He’s only eleven. Rest of the family doesn’t drink much, either. Think it’s silly to take a drink before dark. Silly not to. Gerald and Eva went for a short drive, just for some fresh air. Don’t know why fresh air should be better than any other kind. Did you want to see Dorothy?”

“Is she here?”

He shook his head solemnly. “Went to a movie. My orders. She’d have sat around here brooding, otherwise. Brooding isn’t good for a potential psychopath. Dorothy’s that, even if she is a smart girl. But I’m helping straighten her out. Sally wouldn’t let me help her. Didn’t like me. Didn’t trust me, I guess. But Dorothy likes me. I can help her.”

“Help her how?”

“Treatment. Science of mental health. I’m an expert.’ Know more psychiatry than psychiatrists. All techniques. Used to be a mentalist with an act in vaudeville. Clairvoyance. Studied it all my life. Know what you’re thinking right now.”

“What?”

“That I ought to be able to cure myself of drinking too much.”

He was dead right. I laughed and admitted it. Screwball or not, I was beginning to like him.

Chapter 3

"I'M ALWAYS right," Wernecke said. "But here's the answer to what you were thinking. Could stop drinking, easily. Don't want to. I *like* to drink; why should I stop? Not an alcoholic. Not a compulsion drinker. I'm drunk because I like to be drunk. What's wrong with that?"

I said, "Nothing, I guess."

"Maybe shorten my life a bit, but why not? Live life the way I like to live it while I do live. Sensible?"

"If you think so."

"Besides, not drunk all the time. Only half the time. Have brilliant mind when I'm sober. Do as much thinking sober half the time as most people sober all the time. Dickie Stanton has brilliant mind too. Prodigy. But he's only eleven. Doesn't drink. Did you know Sally?"

I merely nodded. As long as he kept talking, the less I said the better.

"Wonderful girl. But she didn't like me. Could have treated her, helped her. You were a friend of Sally's?" I nodded again.

"Condolence call, I suppose. They're silly, but I'm glad you came. Nobody to drink with and I promise to stay home till Gerald and Eva get back. Drink up; I'm way ahead of you. You're sober."

I took another sip of the whisky and told him I didn't like to drink fast.

"Sensible. Never drink fast, just so you don't stop drinking once you've started. Better that way. Get an edge and keep it. Do my best work when I have just an edge."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"Inventor. Apply mental science to electronics. Do wonderful things. But make my money out of gadgets. Patented some a few years ago and have regular income. Royalties on patents. Not much but don't need much. Simple tastes. Enough to drink all I want. Don't like sex. You like sex?"

"Yes."

"You're young. Drinking's better. Where was I? Oh, yes. Got enough money for drinking. Pay room and board here. Good thing for Gerald; helps him get by, put Dorothy through college. Sally didn't want to go to college. Wanted a job, her own apartment. My name's Ray Wernecke. Sally tell you about me?"

"Yes. She called you Uncle Ray."

"Probably told you I was no good and a lush. Didn't like me and I could have helped her. Not really girls' uncle, fifth cousin by marriage or

something. Eva's brother. Gerald and Eva adopted girls when parents died out in Colorado. Ten years ago. Sally was twelve, Dorothy ten. They call me Uncle Ray. Don't you call me Uncle Ray, though. Just Ray. What's your name?"

"Hunter. Ed Hunter."

"Heard it before. Say—" He sat up straight and looked a little less drunk. "You were with her Thursday night. When she died. Private detective, defending her against Martians. Only you didn't. Not your fault."

"You mean you think she *was* killed? That she didn't die of heart trouble?"

"Everybody dies of heart trouble, Hunter. Whatever causes it, your heart stops and that's what kills you."

"You mean you think Sally's death wasn't natural?"

He shook his head. "No. Talking crazy. Don't pay any attention to anything I say when I'm this drunk. There *are* Martians, but what reason would they have to kill Sally?"

"I don't know," I said. "What makes you think there are Martians?"

"Communicated with them. Clairvoyantly. Never saw one that I know of. But they're here on Earth, among us. In disguise. Are you a Martian?"

"Sorry, no."

"You wouldn't admit it if you were. But maybe you aren't. Afraid I'm the one told Sally about Martians. Shouldn't have. Too big an idea for her to handle. But haven't faintest idea what made her think Martians were after *her*. Never told her that. Developed persecution complex. I could have cured it."

I said, "If you aren't kidding me, Mr. Wernecke, if you really believe there are Martians on Earth, how do you know they wouldn't have had any reason to kill Sally?"

"Friendly, that's why. Have got their thoughts, clairvoyantly. Only man who does, far as I know. If they wanted to kill anybody, they'd kill me. Well, here comes Gerald and Eva."

The door was opening and I put down my glass of whisky and stood. Mrs. Stanton came in first. Plump, fortyish, and rather stupid looking, but in a nice way, the kind of woman who listens to soap operas all day. Mr. Stanton, behind her, looked a bit older, possibly fifty. He was small and slender with a pale sallow face; he looked ill.

Ray Wernecke performed the introductions without getting up from the couch. The woman nodded and looked at me with gravely expressionless eyes, like a cow's. Stanton stepped forward and shook hands. "Glad to meet you, young man. Shall we step into my study?" We did, and he closed the door. "May I offer you a drink?" he asked me, when we were seated.

"Thanks, I just had one. A rather stiff one; I'm afraid I didn't finish it."

He grimaced slightly. "I'm afraid my brother-in-law's hospitality doesn't cover the refinement of drinking. He prefers quantity to quality and assumes everyone else does. Has he been talking your arm off?"

"Not quite."

"I'm afraid you have a bad impression of him. Actually, he's quite nice when he's sober. And, for that matter, when he's drinking I've never seen him argumentative or annoying. Never worse than a bit incoherent and that only when he's been drinking steadily for several days, as now. I'm afraid Sally's death started him this time. He was quite fond of her." I said, "But not she of him."

"Did he tell you that, or did Sally?"

"As it happens, both of them mentioned it."

"Yes, it's true. Sally did feel a certain antagonism to Ray; I've never understood it. Her sister doesn't share it; she's quite fond of him. So are my wife and I."

I said, "My talk with him explains one thing—where Sally acquired her delusion about Martians. Does Mr. Wernecke really believe in them, or was he pulling my leg?"

"It may sound strange, Mr. Hunter, but I honestly can't answer that question. When he's sober, he denies it and laughs about it, but it seems to be a fixed idea with him every time he's been drinking for a long time. Ray is quite sane—unless you consider mild dipsomania as a form of insanity. In fact, he has a quite brilliant mind; he was probably somewhat incoherent in talking to you so you wouldn't have realized it. But he does have a broad scientific knowledge, especially in psychology and psychiatry."

I said, "He told me he used to be a mentalist with an act in vaudeville. Is that true?" 28

"I'm afraid he was pulling your leg on that. He has a bachelor of science degree and he was a high school teacher until he was in his thirties; during that time he did research in electronics on his own time and took out some patents that have brought him a steady income ever since. I'm afraid that income spoiled his career—by normal standards, if not by his. It enabled him to quit work and indulge his dipsomania. He hasn't worked since, except for his own amusement occasionally. But—enough about my brother-in-law. I told you that much about him only because you saw him at his worst. Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Hunter?"

He'd been doing it, by talking, but I couldn't tell him that.

I said, "I just want to ask you this, Mr. Stanton. Are you absolutely, perfectly satisfied that Sally's was a natural death? I know it seems to be, on medical evidence. And I know the Martians she believed in were mythical. But I'm still haunted by the coincidence that she thought she was going to be killed and that she died."

"I—I don't see how it could have been other than natural, Mr. Hunter. The way I heard the story from Captain Bassett, there didn't seem to be any doubt at all, especially when both the medical examiner and the specialist who'd been treating her cardiac condition agreed perfectly. And you were right in the next room, weren't you, and probably still awake at the time?"

I nodded. It sounded silly now, what I'd been thinking—that you can kill a

person with a very bad heart instantaneously and without leaving a mark by giving the victim a sudden fright. And, remote as the possibility seemed, there was that open window on the airshaft.

I said, "I don't mean, Mr. Stanton, that I *think* Sally's death wasn't natural. It's just that—well, if there's even the slightest possibility of it being otherwise, I'd like to look into that possibility."

He frowned slightly. "I'm afraid, young man, that I can't agree-with you that there was even a possibility of foul play. Nor can I afford to hire you to make an investigation. If you know anything about department stores, you know that I don't make a fortune as a buyer. And with the expense of putting Sally's sister through college—"

I interrupted him. "I didn't have that in mind at all, Mr. Stanton. It's a personal matter with me. After all, I was there, supposed to be protecting Sally. If she *was* killed, it was my fault."

Mr. Stanton shook his head slowly. "I fear you're wrong, Mr. Hunter. Rather, I should say, I hope you're wrong. I see no basis whatever for believing Sally didn't die naturally. Rut if you suspect otherwise, I won't stand in the way of any investigation you wish to make on your own. I'll help you in any way I can."

I said, "Tell me this, then. Would anyone—I mean *did* anyone benefit from Sally's death in any way that you know of?"

"Not to speak of. The Doerrs left their daughters only a few hundred dollars, long since used up, and some practically worthless land out in northwest Colorado."

"Who inherited Sally's share of that?"

"I don't even know. As far as I know, Sally didn't make a will. No reason, of course, why she should have. I hadn't even thought about the matter till now. I don't know whether legally—since Sally died intestate—that property interest would go to me, as her guardian, or to Dorothy, as her sister."

He sighed. "Not that I want it; it's worth almost nothing and Dorothy is welcome to Sally's share of it. But I suppose legal steps will have to be taken to transfer Sally's interest and keep the title clear."

"Are you sure the land is worthless?" I asked him. "Yes, it happens we can be sure of it. A little less than a year ago there was an offer of three hundred dollars for it. Sally and Dorothy immediately got the idea that possibly it had some fabulous value that someone else had found out about, oil or something. So we had an El Paso firm of geologists send a field man out to look it over; my brother-in-law went with him. Ray had been planning a trip West last summer anyway and said he'd check into the source and motive of the offer.

"I've read the report of the geologist. The land is completely worthless, except small portions of the flat parts of the tract for cattle grazing and not very good for that. Definitely not oil land, no indication of minerals. He even went over it with a Geiger counter on the off-chance of uranium."

"And did Mr. Wernecke find out where the offer came from?"

“Yes. It was on the up and up; it came from a rancher whose land adjoined the property. He’d been grazing his stock on it anyway and decided he might as well own it if he could get it for a nominal sum. He upped his offer to four hundred, but wouldn’t go higher than that.”

“Was that a fair price, do you think?”

“Probably. But the girls decided not to sell it, for sentimental reasons if no other. The taxes are negligible, a few dollars a year. And they liked the idea of owning a big tract of land, even if it’s pretty worthless.”

“That’s all the estate they own?”

“Yes. Not even insurance. After Sally took a job, I remember that she was talking about taking out a small policy, just enough to cover funeral expenses. But I don’t think she ever got around to it. There wasn’t any policy among her papers. She had a small bank account; her bank book showed that it had been a hundred and eighteen dollars but that she drew out a hundred in cash last Wednesday. The hundred dollars was in her purse.”

I nodded. That was the hundred Sally had tried to hire us with and then had offered to me to spend the night guarding her.

I told him about that and told him that Sally had told us she could raise another hundred if necessary. I said, “It isn’t important, but what did she mean by that? Would she have borrowed it from you?”

“I doubt if she would have asked me; she knows we’re on a pretty close budget financially. Possibly she would have gone to Ray; she wouldn’t have liked to ask him because of her antagonism toward him, but he’d have lent it to her all right. Or possibly she would have borrowed it from a loan company—a salary loan. I don’t know.”

It didn’t seem to matter.

I went back to the Colorado property angle; it didn’t seem to mean anything, but then again it could conceivably provide a motive and nothing else seemed to.

“Do you know anything about the firm of geologists who looked over the property in Colorado?” I asked him. “How reputable it is, I mean?”

“As it happens, yes, I do know. The firm is Wade and McNally; I know George McNally well; went to school with him, here in Chicago, before he went West and became a top-flight geologist. And I know, independently of that, that his firm is one of the biggest and most reputable in the West.

“That’s why, when the girls got their offer for the property, I wrote to George instead of a Denver firm. Denver would have been cheaper because there’d have been less traveling time and expense.”

“Did McNally go himself?”

“No, but he wrote me afterward, when he gave me the report, that he’d sent one of his best men, a top field man named—I remember the name because it was appropriate for a geologist—Jack Silver.”

“And there’s been no new offer for the land since the girls turned down four hundred?”

"No. Probably never will be. They should have sold while they had the chance."

"Did Sally have any enemies, Mr. Stanton?"

"No, no one who even disliked her, as far as I know."

"Was she engaged? Did she have any suitors?"

"Oh, she had dates with various young men. None of them were serious, as far as I know. About a month ago I got the impression that one young fellow she was going with was serious; I think Sally would have married him if he'd asked her. But apparently they broke up over something or other. I mentioned him the last time Sally was here—that was a week ago today—and she said that she wasn't going with him any more. I don't know which of them broke things off, though, and I didn't ask."

"Who was the fellow?"

"William Haberman, his name is. I've met him—and rather liked him—but all I know about him, is that his father runs a used-car lot in Evanston and William works for him, selling cars."

"You say the last time you saw Sally was a week ago today, last Sunday. Was she alone then?"

"Yes. She was here for dinner and she and Dorothy left right after dinner to see a movie downtown. Dorothy came back alone after the show."

"And was that the last time any of you saw her, or heard from her?"

"As far as I know, yes. She may have talked to Dorothy on the phone after that—you'd have to ask Dorothy — but I'm pretty sure they weren't together. Dorothy's taking a summer course at the University to make up a subject she failed in last semester; she's nearing examination time and has been staying home studying most evenings. She went somewhere Tuesday evening, I believe, but it wasn't with Sally."

"Did you know that Sally believed in Martians?"

"Yes. For some time, in fact. I tried to talk her out of the idea, but I gave up." He shrugged. "When somebody gets a fixed idea, you just can't talk them out of it."

"But weren't you worried about—about her mind?"

"Somewhat, yes, but not too much. Sally was no mental heavyweight, but she was sensible enough about everything else. Rather suggestible, yes, and she must have picked up her delusion about the existence of Martians listening to Ray when he was in his cups so I could, at least, account for where it came from. I didn't see anything dangerous in it. And—aside from trying to talk her out of it, which I assure you I did do—what could I do about it?"

"Did you try to send her to a psychiatrist?"

"Yes, and offered to pay his bill. But she refused to go to one, and what could I do about it? She certainly wasn't insane; it would have been ridiculous—and brutal—to have her committed. I figured—maybe it was wishful thinking—that it was a wild idea that would eventually wear off, and that, in

any case, it was harmless. Sure you won't have a drink, Mr. Hunter? I've got some good sherry in the cupboard there, and believe I'm in the mood for a glass of it myself."

"In that case, yes," I said, "and thanks. It'll take away the taste of the raw whisky. I hope you won't" think I'm criticizing you, Mr. Stanton, but I don't completely see how you could have been sure Sally's aberration was harmless. It seems to me that if a person is suffering from a delusion, it indicates a psychopathic state, and that in itself—" I bogged down trying to word what I wanted to say. Before I could disentangle myself to start over, Stanton was coming back from the cabinet with two glasses of sherry.

He said, "I see your point. But *is* a delusion necessarily insanity? Don't most of us have delusions? Now—well here's a perfect example, to my mind. My wife believes in religion—hi a definite personal God, surrounded by angels and cherubim and seraphim, and a Holy Ghost, and the spirits of the dead who have been good. And, even worse, in a devil, surrounded by lesser devils and the spirits of the dead who have been bad. Now between a belief in *that* and a belief in Martians, I'll take Martians any day. There are canals on Mars—or plenty of astronomers think there are—that indicate Mars is inhabited by intelligent beings. And if you've been following rocket research you know we're going to get to Mars pretty soon—at least within your lifetime. What's impossible about Martians having got here first—and a long time ago, for all we know. And if they've got a super-science, why couldn't they be here now, without us knowing it? I'd rather any day believe that than believe in Heaven, and the fact that *it's* inhabited. I've *seen* Mars. I even saw it through a telescope once. I know it's there. I've never seen Heaven. Frankly—don't tell my wife so—I think she's more nearly crazy than Sally was."

I sipped the sherry and it was good. There was a flaw somewhere in Mr. Stanton's reasoning, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Or was there a flaw?

I said, "But—weren't you worried when you learned that Sally had been to the police to get protection from Martians who were trying to kill her? Believing Martians exist is harmless, maybe, but adding a persecution complex and getting afraid of them isn't. Fear *is* harmful."

"True. But still I didn't want the police to hold Sally for observation. While I was talking to Captain Bassett, though, I made up my mind to talk to Sally again at the first opportunity and try again to get her to see a psychiatrist. It was Wednesday morning that he was here; I happened to be home because I was ill—or, let us say, more ill than usual. I tried to reach her by phone that afternoon and evening, but apparently she didn't go home at all, at least up to eleven o'clock, which was the last time I tried. I tried again, from the store, Thursday afternoon and again Thursday evening. I know now that she was with you both times."

I asked, "Was it you who phoned about two o'clock in the morning, the call that waked me up?"

"No, I tried the last time at about half past eleven. I couldn't risk staying up

later than that. I'm under doctor's orders to get lots of sleep. I'm afraid my heart is considerably worse than Sally's was. Not the same condition; Sally had an enlarged heart, my case is angina pectoris. I'm able to keep on working, with the loss of only an occasional day, but I'm under a pretty strict regimen." He smiled wryly. "I shouldn't even be drinking this sherry, but I slip occasionally."

I'd been sipping mine while he talked and it was near enough gone that I could take the rest at one swallow, so I stood up and thanked him. I couldn't think of any more questions to ask.

There was no one in the living room when he escorted me to the door, and I was just as glad of that. There was nothing I wanted to ask Mrs. Stanton or to say to her, and I was just as glad not to tangle with Ray Wernecke again and be urged to finish that tremendous drink he'd poured for me and which still stood on the coffee table where I'd put it down when the Stantons had returned.

At the door Stanton said, "Thank you for sending flowers. It was nice of you, knowing Sally only for a day."

"I liked her," I told him. "I liked her a lot."

On the way home I decided that I liked Stanton. I couldn't make up my mind about Ray Wernecke; what Stanton had told me about him explained quite a bit, but he was still a queer duck.

Uncle Am was in our room, reading. "Well, kid?" he said.

"Didn't get much," I said. "She's got an uncle screwier than she was and she got her ideas about Martians from him. Only it's an open question whether he himself really believes in them. He says he does when he's drunk and says he doesn't when he's sober."

"Did he give her the idea they were after her?"

"Says he didn't, and I guess he's right. She was home last Sunday and was all right then. And it was Wednesday, the day before she came to see us, that she went to the police, so it would have been in between that she began to get the idea that the Martians were going to kill her. Up to then they were friendly, or at least impersonal."

"Uh-huh. Anything else? Find out why her guardian hadn't taken her to a psychiatrist? Especially after she went to the police for protection?" I told him about that.

"Well, kid, it all makes sense. What's eating you? Or are you satisfied now?"

"I guess I am. I still don't like that phone-call business. Stanton says he didn't make it."

"Ed, he could be lying about that, and for an obvious and simple reason. Say he did call at two In the morning; maybe he went to bed and then waked up and decided to try once more. So he gets up and tries again and a man's voice answers. And he figures Sally's got company and it would be embarrassing to have her know that he'd found it out, so he hangs up. And

now he might be embarrassed to admit that he thought that about his own ward, and especially that he'd hung up without speaking. So he just says he didn't make the call."

"It could be," I admitted. But I didn't think so, myself. "Anyway, there doesn't seem to be any motive, financial or otherwise. And even if there was, I still don't see how she *could* have been murdered."

"Kid, forget it or you'll start believing in Martians yourself. How's about taking in a show tonight?"

We took in a show and then turned in, reasonably early.

I tried not to think about Sally, but I dreamed about her. I dreamed that I was sitting in the chair in her apartment, guarding her, and that Sally opened the bedroom door and stood there, naked, and said, "Ed, I'm afraid. Come in and sleep with me." And then, before I could move or speak there was something tall and shadowy standing behind her in the doorway. It gestured, and Sally wasn't there any more and the tall dark shadow started walking across the room toward me and I was so scared that I couldn't move a muscle. When it got almost to me I woke up. I was sweating like a horse.

The room was bright with moonlight and I walked over to the dresser and got a detective story magazine. I didn't want to wake Uncle Am so I took it down the hall to the bathroom and read awhile there, enough to get myself thoroughly awake and to drive the dream out of my mind. The story was a murder story, but it was a nice understandable one where the victim had been shot with a machine gun by gangsters. Machine guns and gangsters seemed like familiar, friendly things. 'I decided that I'd better decide that Sally Doerr had died a natural death and that I was making an ass of myself suspecting otherwise. So I decided that and went back to bed. If I dreamed any more, I don't remember it. The next morning was a Monday morning, like any other Monday morning until, at ten o'clock, the phone rang.

Uncle Am happened to be in the outer office getting a drink at the water cooler and I was in the inner office looking out of the window. We have phones in both offices and one is an extension of the other so either of us could have answered it, but so that we don't cross ourselves by answering both phones at once we had adopted the system of whoever was in the inner office doing the answering. So I picked up the phone and said, "Hunter and Hunter."

"Is this one of the Hunters speaking?"

"Yes," I said. "This is Ed Hunter."

"You don't know me, Mr. Hunter. My name is Yat-Dun." At least that was the way it sounded; I could ask him to spell it later if it turned out to be important.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Yat-Dun?" I asked him. I noticed that Uncle Am was standing in the doorway, looking at me to see if I was going to signal him to get on the other phone.

"Just Yat-Dun," said the voice on the phone. "We do not use such titles as

Mister in connection with our true names. You see, I am a Martian.”

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Chapter 4

I GAVE Uncle Am a quick signal to pick up the receiver on the extension phone and listen in. He disappeared from the doorway. I was saying, "What can we do for—" when there was the click of the receiver being lifted on the extension and the voice said, "Do not try to trace this call or I'll have to hang up."

"We're not trying to trace it," I said. "We haven't the facilities, if for no other reason. But the other Mr. Hunter—Ambrose Hunter—is here too, and I signaled him to listen in on the extension. You don't mind that, do you?"

"Not at all. I'd rather talk to both of you. I'd like to engage you to investigate the death of Miss Sally Doerr. I understand you already have an interest in the case."

"Understand from whom?" I asked.

"That does not matter. I understand that you are not completely satisfied that Miss Doerr's death was a natural one. Is that true?"

"More or less," I admitted. "Although if her death was not a natural one, I don't know how it was accomplished. Do you?"

"I do not. But would you care to undertake the investigation?—on a suitable retainer, of course. A thousand dollars, let us say. And an additional thousand dollars if you produce satisfactory results."

"What is your interest in the case?" I asked.

"Is that important?"

"I'm afraid it is. We can't work for a client in the dark. We'd have to know who you are and what your interest is. And how and where to report to you."

"I've told you who and what I am. You won't need my address because reports do not matter. If you catch the murderer, simply turn over your evidence to the police and let them make the arrest; I will know about it."

"But why are you interested?"

"Simply that we, the Martians, had nothing to do with Miss Doerr's death. Martians don't kill. If even a vague suspicion exists in the minds of any terrestrials that we had anything to do with Miss Doerr's death or any other crime, we want that suspicion removed. We feel that an investigation of the case should remove it."

"You don't believe she died a natural death?"

"Not completely. My reasons are the same as yours, no more, no less. I can give you no help whatsoever except to finance your investigation. Do you accept?"

“Only if you’ll tell us who you are.”

“Good. Then you accept. I have told you who I am. You will find your retainer under the desk blotter of the desk in your inner office. Thank you.”

There was a click. Then another one as Uncle Am cradled the phone in the outer office. I put my phone back and stared at it.

I was lifting the corner of the blotter as Uncle Am came into the inner office and closed the door after him. There wasn’t any money there. Not that I’d expected any.

I looked at Uncle Am and he looked at me. “What’s your guess, kid? A screwball?”

I said slowly, “I don’t know. There wasn’t any newspaper story on Sally’s death. Not many people know even that I was with Sally when she died, let alone that I’m not satisfied about it. Her family, Frank Bassett, a couple of doctors. If that had sounded more like Frank’s voice, I’d think maybe he was pulling a gag on us.”

“That wasn’t Frank’s voice,” Uncle Am said. “Of course, he could have put someone else up to making the call, but I’ve never known Frank to try a practical joke. He doesn’t like ‘em, in fact. And that was a pretty pointless one. Say—”

“What?”

“Ben Starlock. He sent us Sally Doerr in the first place, so it’s logical he’d follow through.”

I nodded. “Think you got it, Uncle Am. That wasn’t Ben’s voice, but he probably had one of his operatives do it. And he knows Frank Bassett as well as we do; he could have learned from Frank what happened Thursday night. Only—damn it, I’ve known Ben Starlock to play jokes, but not such pointless ones. He’s got a fair sense of humor. I can even see how he thought it was funny to send Sally Doerr to us. But that phone call just now—I don’t see why he’d think that was funny. What did he think he was accomplishing? He didn’t expect us to take him seriously.”

“At least not after we found the thousand dollar bill wasn’t there. Say, kid, you looked under the blotter pad. Why not look under the blotter, like he said? I mean, between the blotter and the pad.”

There wasn’t anything to lose, so I looked.

I came up with a thousand dollar bill. Grover Cleveland’s picture was on it, and it was very pretty.

I said, “I’ll be damned.”

Uncle Am took it and looked at it and felt it. “If it isn’t real, it’s a beautiful counterfeit job, Ed.”

We looked at one another and we were both thinking the same thing, so neither of us had to say it. Whether that bill was real or counterfeit, this was no gag of Ben Starlock’s. A thousand dollars isn’t any joke.

Whoever had been on the phone had meant business. He’d handed us a line of malarkey about who he was and why he wanted Sally’s death investigated,

but he really wanted it done. A thousand dollars' worth.

Uncle Am sat down on a corner of the desk. He said, "Kid, you talked to both Stanton and Wernecke. Could that voice have been either of theirs?"

I thought back. I said, "I didn't talk to either of them on the phone and that makes a voice different. But—well, if this was either one of them, he was disguising his voice. Making it higher in pitch and probably talking through a silk handkerchief or something. I'm surer that it wasn't Stanton than that it wasn't Wernecke, though, because when I talked to Wernecke he was pretty drunk and his voice was thick. It might sound different when he's sober."

"Wernecke's the one who believes in Martians, isn't he?"

"Maybe he does and maybe he doesn't. But if he wanted to hire us to investigate Sally's death, why'd he do it that way? He could have done it openly."

"So could Stanton. Ed, it's got to be one of those two. Who else? Whichever it is, he must have *some* reason for wanting to keep himself out of it."

I said, "Well, I guess we can assume for the moment that it's one or the other."

"Sure. Well, kid, it's a thousand bucks and it's in American money, not Martian. What'll we do, use it to light a cigar?"

"Is it ethical to take a case and a retainer when we don't know who our client is?"

Uncle Am looked at the bill again. "I don't see why not, kid, as long as the case itself is on the up and up. And what could be up-and-upper than to investigate a death to learn whether it's murder or not?"

He looked thoughtful. "Just the same, let's not bank it yet. If we start digging in on the case—and I guess we're going to—we'll probably find out whose thousand this was and why he wanted to get it to us anonymously. And it just could be that when we learn that much we won't want to keep it. Meanwhile, I'll put this in the safe and hold it in abeyance. That way, we're neither accepting it or turning it down."

We happened to have a safe, not because we really needed one but because it had come with the office. And since it was there anyway, we'd paid a few bucks to have the combination changed and we'd been using it to hold petty cash and whatever papers—there weren't many—we didn't care to leave easily accessible in the file cabinet. The file cabinet locks, but a kid could pry it open with a screwdriver if he wanted to badly enough.

Uncle Am put the thousand dollar bill into an envelope and put it in the safe. He came back and sat down. He said, "Well, Ed, we haven't anything else to work on anyway, so what's to lose. First let's figure how that money got there. As it happens, I put a fresh blotter in that blotter pad Saturday, so we know it was put there since then. And it was before I opened up the office this morning because I haven't left since. You went downstairs to get cigarettes about nine o'clock, but I haven't been out once."

“All right,” I said. “Then it was put there Saturday night, Sunday, or Sunday night—last night. I’d guess last night—after my call at the Stanton place.”

“That’s probable, kid. Although he said otherwise, maybe Stanton was impressed by what you told him about how you felt about Sally’s death. So after you left, he came here and—”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “From Stanton’s scale of living, I don’t think he’d have a thousand dollar bill ready on hand—and he couldn’t have gone to the bank on Sunday.”

“Let’s take one thing at a time, Ed. Right now we’re worrying about how the money got here. Let’s take a look at the lock on the door to see if it looks like it’s been monkeyed with.”

We went to the door and looked the lock over carefully. There were no scratches or any other sign that it had been picked or forced. And it was a Yale lock and a good one. Nobody short of a locksmith—or an experienced burglar with a locksmith’s skill—could have got past it without breaking it.

Uncle Am shook his head. “Not this way, Ed. Unless he swiped a scrub lady’s passkey or something. Must have got in the window off the fire escape. That’d have been easy enough; we’ve been leaving it open since it got so hot, so the office isn’t stuffy in the morning.”

I said, “Maybe our scrub woman is a Martian, an accomplice of the one who just phoned. Maybe she put the bill there for him.”

“Yeah, sure. Anyway, I’m going to check with her and with the building manager on what the system is and where the keys are kept. But our friend probably came in the window. Let’s look at it.”

We went back into the inner office and looked at the sill of the open window that led to the fire escape. There wasn’t any sign that anyone had entered that way, but there wouldn’t have been in any case unless he’d gone out of his way to leave marks by putting his shoe on the sill instead of just stepping across it.

I climbed out onto the fire escape and looked down into the alley. I called back to Uncle Am that I was going down it to look around and that I’d come back up the elevator.

I went down three flights to the bottom landing on the second floor. There was a sliding ladder there that could be pushed down to the surface of the alley, against the pull of a counter weight that, normally, held it up. I examined the groove that the ladder slid in and the edges of the ladder itself and felt pretty sure the ladder hadn’t been in the descended position in a long time, probably not since the last time it had been painted.

I climbed over the railing of the second-story landing, hung from the edge and dropped into the alley. It was about a four-foot drop.

An athlete taking a running jump could probably catch a bottom rung of that fire escape and get up that way, but neither Stanton nor Wernecke—and especially Stanton—had looked like an athlete to me so I looked around. The

building across the alley had a shipping platform for loading trucks. There were piles of cartons and boxes on it.

A man in overalls was carrying cartons from one stack the building. I stepped up onto the platform and waited for him to come back for another load and when he did, I asked him, "Could you tell me if there are cartons or boxes left out here on the platform at night?"

"Huh? What do you want to know for?" He looked at me suspiciously.

I flashed my agency identification at him. I said, "There was a burglary in the building across the alley last night. We're wondering if the burglar got in from the fire escape. And if so, how he got up onto it. If there were boxes handy he might have piled up a few to stand on so he could reach up and get aboard."

"Oh." He looked over at the fire escape and then walked to the edge of the platform and spat tobacco juice into the alley. "Sure. See those?" He pointed to a big pile of wooden crates at the far end of the platform. "They're empties. We stack them there out of the way and there's a guy with a truck comes every Monday afternoon and picks 'em up, pays something for the wood in 'em. But all those were there last night; I ain't added any yet this morning."

I asked him, "Could you tell if they're the way you stacked them?"

He strolled over and looked at them, and then turned. "Don't think they are," he said. "Wouldn't swear to it, but that nearest stack is pretty sloppy. I generally stack neater than that."

I joined him and looked them over and he was right. There were four stacks of boxes, each about six feet high. The near stack was considerably sloppier than the other three.

"Happen to know," I asked him, "if this alley is dark at night? Would a man need to have a flashlight with him to see what he was doing?"

"Nope. It's not bright, but you can see your way around. I've worked late a few times, enough to know that. Did the burglar get much?"

"About a thousand," I told him. "Thanks a lot."

I went around to the front entrance and came up in the elevator. I told Uncle Am about the boxes and he nodded.

"Sounds likely," he said. "And he wouldn't have had to leave that way and hang and drop unless he wanted to for some reason. There's a spring lock on the door. He could have got out from the inside once he was in here and left the door locked behind him."

"But if he did that," I pointed out, "he must have gone around to the alley again to stack the empty boxes back on the platform where he got them. I don't know why he went to that trouble."

"For the same reason he went to the trouble of telling us he's a Martian and giving us the rest of the gobbledegook he handed out over the phone. Just plain razzle-dazzle. Probably thought we'd be stupid enough to think Martians can walk through locked doors unless he left simple and obvious evidence of how he got in. Well, I'm going to talk to those scrub women anyway."

"Why? If we're sure—and I am—that he came up the fire escape?"

"They might have seen him leave. While you were messing around down there, I called the manager of the building and got the dope from him on the key situation and the scrub women's hours and stuff like that. There are two scrub women; one for the top four floors and one for the second to the fifth floor; the stores on the first floor do their own cleaning. They come on every night—except Saturday night—at eleven o'clock and work till seven in the morning. The keys to the offices are individual ones—not one passkey—and they're kept on two rings in a broom closet on the second floor. That broom closet has a Yale lock on it and each of the scrub women has a key to that lock. Each gets the ring of keys for her floors when she comes on duty.

"It's probably right that he got in by way of the fire escape but I'm going to talk to those women anyway—or at least the one who works from this floor on down. She might have seen, him leave the place if he went down the stairs. He couldn't have taken the elevator down; it doesn't run on Sundays."

"We still don't know for sure he didn't leave that money Saturday evening."

"For near-enough sure, kid. It was your call at the Stantons Sunday afternoon that stirred up Stanton—or Wernecke—to hire us. Maybe—hell, let's call him Stanton—maybe Stanton had a few faint doubts of his own but your questions crystallized them and your suspicions tacked onto his own made him decide to do something."

I nodded. "I guess you're right. Otherwise he'd have hired us right away, on Friday or Saturday. He wouldn't have let the case cool off for several days first. All right, I guess it's important to try to find out who our client is so you're going to look up the scrub women. What do you want me to do?"

"Well, kid, I think we ought to have down—mostly for me to study—a report from you on Thursday night and what was said between you and Stanton and between you and Wernecke out at Rogers Park yesterday. You told me roughly, but not every little detail and we don't know yet what's important and what isn't. Luckily, you've got a damn near eidetic memory. How's about making full report of all the conversation between Sally and you—except personal stuff, if any—and between you and the boys at Rogers Park. While it's fresh in your mind get down every word you can remember, and everything that happened to date. Including our conversation with our Martian pal half an hour or so ago."

I sighed. "Probably take me the rest of the day to do it, but okay. Here goes a case of writer's cramp."

"Hell, kid,, we're rich. Call up some employment agency and have them send around a stenographer—a good one who can take dictation as fast as you can talk—for the rest of the day. If you can get one right away you can probably finish your report by noon and then leave her here to type it up during the afternoon. It'll save half a day's time for you and make it easier too."

"Swell," I said. "There's an employment agency in the next block. I'll run around and see what's on tap."

"Phone 'em and have it sent here. You don't have to see what the gal looks like. You're hiring a temporary stenographer, riot a pony for a chorus line. What do you care if she's got bowlegs and buck teeth. It's better if she does; it'll keep your mind on your dictating."

"Okay, maybe you're right." I picked up the phone book and started looking for the number of the employment agency.

Uncle Am said, "Look, kid, before you make that call make another. One of the things I want to do is take a look at Sally's apartment. If Stanton's still got the key, I'll need his permission. You've already met him; you can talk to him easier. So call him for me, will you?"

So I phoned Stanton's home. Mrs. Stanton answered; she said Mr. Stanton was at work and gave me the phone number to call there. I called it and got him.

He said, when I asked him about Sally's apartment and the key to it, "We haven't been there at all, Mr. Hunter, since the night of Sally's death. I talked to her landlord over the phone the next day and found out from him that her rent was paid to the end of the month, so there isn't any hurry and we haven't got around to going there yet."

"None of you has been in the apartment at all?"

"Not yet. Some day this week Dorothy and my wife will go there and take away the things that belonged to Sally. Dorothy will be able to use the clothes, or most of them. And I suppose some of the other things too."

"Did she rent the place furnished, or was the furniture hers?"

"She rented it furnished, but a lot of the smaller things were her own. Draperies, pillows, lamps and things. Dorothy will know which is which."

"You don't mind our looking the place over again this afternoon?"

"Not at all. I haven't a key, though. Captain Bassett locked the door when we left that night; I don't know what he did with the key except that he didn't hand it to me. But I imagine that the owner of the building has a duplicate. He lives in Apartment 1, downstairs."

I thanked him.

Uncle Am had gone into the outer office to listen in on the extension so I wouldn't have to repeat everything to him. He looked in the doorway and said, "Okay, Ed. Go ahead and call the employment agency. Wait a minute, though; what did you think about the voice?"

For a second I didn't realize what he meant. Then I thought back and compared Stanton's voice, which I'd just heard over the phone for the first time, with the voice of our mysterious client.

"It could be," I said. "If he disguised his voice by pitching it higher and talking very precisely. I wouldn't identify it as the same voice, but I wouldn't say it couldn't be."

"My idea, too. Look, kid, if you're killing time this afternoon, try to get

this Ray Wernecke on the phone and see what *his* voice sounds like. It's probably Stanton hiring us, but don't let's lose track of the other possibility. Well, I'll push along. I'm going to see the two scrub women and have a look at Sally's place."

He left, and I telephoned the employment agency and told them exactly what I wanted and said that, as is was for only a half a day, I expected to pay a good hourly rate.

"There's a girl here now, Mr. Hunter. I was just interviewing her when you called. She's had secretarial experience. Shall I ask her if she'd be interested in coming to you for the rest of today?"

"Sure," I said. "And if she can come, the sooner the better."

"Just a moment, please." And, just a moment later, "She'll start for your place now, Mr. Hunter. She should be there in ten minutes or so. Her name is Monica Wright."

I thanked her and hung up. I thought I might as well kill the waiting time by doing what Uncle Am had suggested—talking to Ray Wernecke over the phone. I wanted to talk to him again anyway, in person, so the best excuse for a phone call would be to make an appointment to see him.

I dialed the Stantons' number again and this time, when Mrs. Stanton answered, I asked for Wernecke. A minute later, his voice came on the phone. "Ray Wernecke speaking."

He sounded sober, or much more nearly so than he'd been yesterday afternoon.

I told him who I was and what I wanted.

"I'll be home this evening," he said. "Can you come around eight o'clock?"

I told him that I could, and thanked him.

After I cradled the phone I stared at it, wondering whether his voice or Stanton's had been that of our client. Neither sounded like it more than the other, but it could have been either voice, disguised a bit.

The outer door opened and I went to see who it was. It wasn't the stenographer yet, I knew; it was too soon after my call to the agency for her to get here.

It was Frank Bassett. He took off his hat and mopped his forehead and then grinned at me. He said, "Hi, Ed. All quiet on the planet Mars?"

Chapter 5

“NOT TOO quiet,” I told him. “Say, Frank, I was just talking to Stanton on the phone and he says he hasn’t got the key to Sally’s place, that you locked the door that night and didn’t give him the key. Have you still got it?”

His eyes widened. “Good Lord, Ed, you still worrying about that business? There’s nothing to it. But about the key—yeah, I absent-mindedly stuck it in my pocket and found it the next day, after I talked to you in the morning. I was over that way in the afternoon so I turned it over to the landlord. He lives in the same building.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“What about? Sure, I explained to him what happened, that one of his tenants had died of heart failure, but that the body was taken away and everything was under control.”

“What did he say?”

“What would you expect him to say? He said he knew Sally Doerr only slightly, but that he was sorry to learn she was dead. And he wanted to know what about her property, and I told him her guardian would probably get in touch with him about it.”

“Stanton did call him,” I said. “He found out the rent was paid till the end of the month, so some time this week Mrs. Stanton and the girl’s sister will drop around and pick up her things.”

“So what? I was just kidding when I asked you about Mars. Look, I came around here to see if you and Am want to sit in on some mild poker tonight, out at my place. A few of the boys are coming around.”

“I’ll ask Am, Frank, and tell him to let you know. Afraid I can’t. I just made myself a date in Rogers Park for this evening.”

“Rogers Park? Listen, Ed, are you *working* on this Sally Doerr business? Did Stanton hire you?”

“We think so,” I said. “We’re not—”

The door opened and a girl came in. She was a blonde, medium-sized, nice. She had a face that would probably have been pretty if she took off her dark shell-rimmed glasses.

I beat her to the punch. “Miss Wright?” I asked her. And when she nodded, I said, “One thing I should have remembered when I was talking to the agency. Do you happen to have a shorthand book?”

“No, Mr. Hunter. You *are* Mr. Hunter?”

“One of them. Afraid we can’t start without a notebook; would you mind

getting one? There's a stationery store in the block north of here. Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

She left and Bassett said, "What's this? Getting prosperous enough to hire a secretary? Well, you show good taste, anyway."

"Just temporary, Frank. I've got something that would take me a day to write out myself and I can dictate it in an hour or two."

"Oh. What did you mean, you *think* Stanton hired you? Didn't you get a retainer to make sure?"

I decided there wasn't any harm in his knowing, so I told him about the phone call we'd got at ten o'clock. He laughed at first, but his face got straight enough when I opened the safe and showed him the thousand dollar bill.

He fingered it and took it to the window to look at it. He said, "It's real, Ed. I'm pretty good at spotting counterfeits. But why the hell would Stanton—it must be Stanton—want to give it to you anonymously?"

"That we haven't figured out yet. And it could be Wernecke instead of Stanton, don't forget. I've checked both of their voices on the phone, and there's no help there. I'd like to know—it might even be a factor in the case."

He took out his notebook and carefully took down the serial number of the bill before he handed it back. He said, "I'll try to trace this for you if I can. Banks keep records of the numbers of thousand dollar bills they give out. Maybe I can find out who your client is. But I'd guess it's Stanton. Only why would he—?"

I said, "Suppose for some reason he didn't want the rest of the family—or some one member of it—to know he was financing an investigation. That would account for it. But—I'll admit I didn't think he could afford it. He didn't act as though he could."

"Maybe he isn't as poor as he makes out," Bassett said. "Lots of people claim to be broke but have some dough stashed away somewhere."

"Could be. But he's sure generous with it. He could have got us to start work on the case on a lot smaller retainer than this. From the money angle, it seems more likely to be Wernecke. I'd like to know just how small his small regular income is."

Bassett pushed his hat to the back of his head. "I'll try to find out that little thing, Ed. I'm getting interested now myself. That thousand bucks kind of changes the look of things, as far as I'm concerned. If one of the family isn't satisfied about how Sally died, maybe they've got some reason for it. I'll get some dope on Wernecke, and on Stanton too. And if that bill traces to either of them, I'll have him in and sweat him as to what he knows; he must know something to invest that much. Maybe I'll even have another little talk—over the phone anyway—with the two doctors who looked at Sally."

"That's fine, Frank. We'll appreciate it. You might ask them if there's anything that could have been given somebody with a weak heart that'd stop the heart without leaving any other symptoms."

“Sure. Well, I’ll tool along. Keep me posted, will you?”

He tooled along and I put the bill back into the safe and was just spinning the dial when Monica Wright came back. I went to the door of the inner office and called her in. I gave her the desk because I thought I could probably think and dictate better if I was free to pace.

I started out by dictating everything I could remember of what Sally had said to Uncle Am and me in the office on Thursday afternoon, then went on to my catching her on the stairs and the events of the evening. I tried to think of everything she’d said that might, even possibly, have a bearing on what had happened. I got to the point where I’d gone to sleep in the chair, and happened to notice that it was a few minutes past noon. “Want to go down and eat, Monica?” I asked her.

She just looked at me. “With things left like that? I want to know what *happened!*”

She was so serious that I grinned at her and then I realized that what had happened, after the point I’d reached in my dictation, hadn’t been funny at all.

I quit grinning and said, “I’m afraid from here on in, it isn’t nice.- Maybe we’d better eat first.”

“You mean that you—?”

I sighed. “All right. It’s easier to go on than to explain.”

I went on. When I finished the events of Thursday night, I said, “There’s maybe about half an hour more. Want to get it over with before we eat, or take a break now?”

“Go on. Let’s finish it now. Please.”

So I got in everything I could remember of my talk with Wernecke and my talk with Stanton and the conversation on the telephone with our Martian client.

“That’s all,” I told her. “Come on. Let’s eat.”

I locked up the office and we went downstairs and had lunch.

Over coffee, she looked at me. “Mr. Hunter—”

“Ed,” I said. “I’ve been calling you Monica.”

“Ed, you weren’t just making that up, what you dictated. It really—?”

“It really,” I told her. “Just that way.”

She shuddered a little, nicely. “How awful. But why didn’t you—? I mean, maybe if you hadn’t gone to sleep in the chair—”

“Miss Wright,” I said. “There are services beyond the call of duty that a detective does not render to a client.”

She colored a little, and on her it looked attractive. But she didn’t give up. “She wasn’t your client. You didn’t take money for protecting her.”

“Listen, Monica,” I said, “she was a sick girl, sick mentally. She was in for a long, frightened night if I’d walked off and left her. I’m glad I didn’t. But I’m also glad that I didn’t—”

I broke off, wondering what there was to be glad about in the fact that I’d stayed in that damned chair. Nothing worse could have happened to Sally if I

hadn't. Of course, if she'd really died of heart failure and I'd actually been with her at the time, it would have been worse for me, but not for her.

And if she *had* been murdered, would my being with her have prevented it?

But She hadn't been. She couldn't have been murdered, any way that I could see—although in that case why had someone thought she might have been, enough to kick in a thousand dollars in cash?

I felt all mixed up, all over again.

I said, "Damn it, let's get back to the office."

We went back to the office and I put Monica and her notes at the desk that had the typewriter on it. I gave her some paper and watched her get started on the typing and wondered why what she'd said had irritated me so much and put me on the defensive, even with myself. Also why was the fact that she hadn't said anything since then—anything about Sally, that is—irritated me even worse.

"I'm going to see a couple of people," I told her. "If the phone rings—"

The phone rang.

It was Uncle Am. "Get yourself a steno, kid? And anything doing at your end, whether or not?"

"I've finished dictating," I said. "I was just going to go over and see Ben Starlock."

"Good idea. He probably sent us Sally at random and for a spur-of-the-moment gag, but there's no harm in getting the details. That's all you had in mind, isn't it?"

"Sure. That, and to be sure he *did* send her."

"Hmmm. Never thought of that. It could be, although I don't see how or why. All I've done thus far is have talks with both of the scrub women. Neither of them saw anybody in the building on Sunday night. All that proves is that we can't get an identification of our client from that angle. Either he came before they went on duty or he both came and left by the fire escape. I'm heading around for Sally's flat now."

"Good," I said. "Go over it with a fine-tooth comb. I just looked at things. I didn't take them apart to look inside. Frank was on the way when I did my looking, and I wanted to be able to tell him I hadn't disturbed anything—Frank was here, by the way. He wants you to play some poker this evening at his place."

"I dunno. Not if I can think of any angle to work on this business. But I'll call him one way or the other. How's the steno?"

"Wonderful," I said.

Uncle Am laughed. "I detect feline overtones. But I suppose you can't talk freely. Uh—did you tell Frank about our client?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'm glad he knows about the money. That leaves us in the clear if it turns out there's anything phony about the deal. Don't forget we're just

holding that in escrow until we know whose it was and what the score is.”

“Let’s not be too damn ethical,” I said. “Especially now that Bassett knows about it. Incidentally, he’s going to try to trace the serial number for us, and check into Stanton’s and Wernecke’s finances a bit.”

“Fine. Well, I’ll be back after I’ve been to Sally’s, but I’ll probably spend two or three hours there. And I’ll talk to the landlord, too. Have to anyway, to get the key from him. Do anything you can think of to amuse yourself if you get back before I do, but remember to lock the door first.”

I growled at him and banged down the phone. It was plenty hot out on the street, but I felt that I wanted to walk, so I walked.

Starlock had gone to lunch late and wasn’t back yet, so I waited.

When he came in he said, “Hi, Ed. Don’t tell me you want a job again already?”

“Not quite yet. Any day now, Ben.”

“Come on in the sanctum. Seriously, are you and Am making out all right? I hope you are.”

“Seriously,” I said, “we aren’t setting the world on fire, but we can’t expect to this soon. And we’re still solvent.”

“Good.” He put his hands behind his head and leaned back in the swivel chair that protested under his bulk. “Don’t let it get you down. Things are dull right now. I’ve got two ops sitting on their tails in the back room this minute. It’s the heat. God knows why, but nobody hires a detective agency in a heat wave. Bet as soon as it’s over, we’ll be so busy we’ll have to be sending you cases.”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you about, Ben. The one you sent us last Thursday. Sally Doerr. Anyway, she said you sent her. Did you? And was it just a gag?”

He grinned. “Well—mostly, Ed. Why?”

“What do you mean, mostly?”

“Just that—well, I kind of liked the gal. I tried to talk her into going to a psychologist or a psychiatrist instead of wasting her money on detectives. Didn’t get to first base. And I figured if I just turned her out, she’d pick another agency at random and like as not pick one that’d take her money. So I thought of sending her to you and Am. All right, it was partly a gag, but in the back of my mind was the thought you’d figure the same way I did about talking her into a psychiatrist and that the more people that told her that, the more chance she’d get the idea. And especially if she talked to you, Ed. You can talk a woman into doing anything, if you put your mind to it.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I think you’re pretty too. But you figured right, Ben. I did talk her into it. She agreed, anyway, to go to one the next day. But she didn’t get around to it. She died that night.”

Starlock’s swivel chair creaked. “The hell,” he said. “How?”

“Heart failure, presumably. But somebody doesn’t think so. We’ve got a retainer to investigate it.”

“How can I help you, Ed?”

I said, “Just tell me exactly what happened when she came here, everything she *told* you. It isn’t likely unless you talked to her for very long, but she might have said something here that she didn’t say to us.”

Starlock pursed his lips. “Well, it was about this time of day, about two o’clock, last Thursday. She came in and asked Jane if she could talk to me—”

“Asked for you by name?”

“No, she asked if she could talk to the manager. Jane usually asks a few questions to screen people who come in, but she didn’t this time. I was sitting in here doing nothing and the door was open; I could see Sally Doerr talking to Jane. And she was worth looking at; I like redheads. Jane glanced in here, probably to see what I was doing, and I nodded to her. So she sent the girl in. She said she wanted to hire us for protection, and I told her to sit down. Then she started talking about Martians.”

“What did she say about them?”

“That they were going to kill her, or try to kill her—I forget which.”

“Give you any details or tell you why they were after her or how she knew they were?”

Starlock smiled wryly. “Nope, I lost interest then and there. I told her all our operatives were busy and we couldn’t help her. I suggested that she go to the police—I figured that if she was as crazy as she sounded, maybe that would be the best thing, that they’d hold her for observation. She said that she’d been to the police already and that they’d refused to help her, and she asked me if I could recommend another detective agency that might not be too busy.

“I started to say no, and then I thought of you and Am and—well, as I said, it was partly a gag and partly not. It did occur to me that you might be able to straighten her out and send her where she should have gone in the first place, to a psychiatrist. Oh, yes, I’d suggested that myself before she asked about another agency, but she didn’t take to the idea.”

“Did you happen to ask how she picked your agency?”

“Yes, I did; I wondered whether someone had sent her *here* for a gag. But she said she picked us out of the phone book, and that’s reasonable enough; we run a fair-sized ad in the classified. I guess that’s all I can tell you, Ed. Damn, I’m sorry to hear she’s dead. Do you really think there’s anything in it? Or are you just going through the motions because somebody hired you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just don’t like coincidences, that’s all. And I did like Sally; I spent the evening with her and she was a nice kid. Not screwy at all, outside of that one delusion. Well, thanks a lot, Ben.”

“Sorry I can’t help you more.”

I went outside and it was so hot on the street that I stopped in to have a cold beer and do some thinking.

Talking to Starlock hadn’t accomplished anything except in the way of elimination; Sally’s story of how she happened to come to us had been

straight, and Starlock's reasons for having sent her to us made sense and were undoubtedly true. That was that, and it didn't get us anywhere at all.

I went around to the Halstead Mutual Insurance Company, where Sally had told me she worked. I spent over an hour there, and didn't learn anything that seemed to lead anywhere. Sally had been merely one of a battery of a dozen stenographers who worked at a dozen desks in a big room. Her immediate superior was a thin spinster named Miss Wilkins—she probably didn't have any first name—who was office manager and apportioned out the work among the stenographers. Sally's work had been mostly typing form letters, occasionally policies. And taking dictation on solicitation letters from any of the salesmen who felt the need for writing to any of his prospects. She'd made thirty-seven dollars a week and was due, within a few months, to get a raise to forty. Apparently she'd got along all right with her boss and with the girls she worked with but had formed no friendships.

I had no trouble getting Miss Wilkins to talk, because nobody had thought to call the company and tell them of Sally's death. She'd been expecting Sally to return to work that morning after the end of her vacation. She'd phoned Sally's place twice and there'd been no answer; she'd thought Sally must have gone out of town and not returned in time; she'd been indignant and a little angry that Sally hadn't telegraphed or telephoned her. And now she was so shocked to learn that Sally was dead that it didn't even occur to her to wonder why I was asking so many questions about her.

I agreed with her that Sally's guardians should have let her know.

"You say the funeral has already taken place? The company would certainly have wanted to send flowers, Mr. Hunter. I *can't* understand why nobody let us know."

"Have you ever met Sally's guardians?"

"No, I haven't. According to our records, she wasn't living with them; she had a room of her own somewhere. We have the address and telephone number on file, of course. Do you want them?"

I thanked her and said I already knew them. I had a sudden brainstorm. It wasn't, in all probability, going to get us anything but it wouldn't hurt or cost much. I asked her if they had a waiting list of prospective employees or if she'd have to start from scratch to find a replacement for Sally.

"I'll call an employment agency," she said. "No, we don't happen to have a waiting list."

"I was wondering," I said. "I know a girl who is a very good stenographer and who happens, just at the moment, to be looking for a job. Her name is Monica Wright. May I send her around to see you?"

"Well—I'll be glad to talk to her if she can come right away. How soon can she be here?"

"This afternoon."

"Then send her. If she can fill the job and wants it, she can start tomorrow morning. But I'll have to find someone today, so please get her here as soon

as you can, so there'll still be time to call an agency."

"I know where she is right now, Miss Wilkins. She'll be here within an hour—or I'll phone and let you know that she isn't coming."

I took a cab back to the agency so I'd have time to keep my promise. Monica was typing busily at the outer office desk and Uncle Am was back; he came to the door in the partition when he heard me come in.

I said "Hi" to both of them and asked Monica to join us in the inner room for a conference. We sat down around the desk in there.

"Monica," I said, "how much more typing do you have to do on what I dictated to you?"

"At a guess, three hours. Maybe a little less, but at least two."

"Have you a typewriter at home? Could you finish it there this evening?"

"Why, yes. But why?"

I said, "After listening to that report I gave you, you know almost as much about this as we do, Monica. I've found a way you might be able to help us on it. Want to?"

"How?"

"Sally's job is wide open. Apparently it never occurred to the Stantons to phone the company she was working for. How'd you like to take it? I just talked to her employer and told her I'd send someone around; I said you were a friend of mine who's a good stenographer and doesn't happen to be working. I don't see any reason why you can't get the job."

"What kind of a job? How much does it pay?"

"Steno-typist, with the Halstead Mutual. Sally was getting thirty-seven, due to be raised to forty. You might have to start at thirty-five."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be enough, Ed. I can make more than that. I'm pretty good. I was making fifty on my last job—and I didn't get fired. The company I was working for moved its headquarters, and I didn't want to move out of Chicago with them."

I said, "The pay doesn't matter. We'd like you to work there for a week, just long enough to get to know some of the girls Sally worked with and ask questions about her. You probably won't get anything, but there's nothing to lose. I don't see how there'd be any motive or angle connected with her work, but we can't pass up the possibility, especially since it's going to be so easy to check if we can get you in there." I didn't want to get too definite since I hadn't talked it over with Uncle Am first, so I looked at him and said, "Right, Uncle Am?"

He got what I meant and made it specific. He said, "You won't lose money on it, Monica. If you take the job and hold it for a week, you'll make—let's say seventy-five dollars. Take it at any price they offer and we'll make up the difference. If you start at thirty-five, we'll add forty. Fair enough?"

"It sounds wonderful, Mr. Hunter. Whom do I see and when?"

I told her who to see and told her to go right away and to take a taxi on us.

Uncle Am added, "Say that you can start tomorrow morning, and if you get

the job come on back here and I'll tell you what kind of questions to ask and we'll talk the whole deal over. Okay?"

It was okay and Monica left right away so she could get there under the hour deadline I'd promised Miss Wilkins.

Uncle Am looked at me after she left. "Kid, how do you do it? Even when you order a girl over the telephone, you get one who looks like a refugee from the movies. Did you specify a pocket edition of a Ziegfeld blonde? Or had you noticed?"

"I hadn't noticed," I said. "She's a good stenographer and I think she's smart, so she'll do all right on the errand we sent her on. Outside of that, I didn't notice."

"Did she step on your corns, or what?"

I said, "I didn't like a crack she made. Not in so many words, but she put across the idea that maybe I should have slept with Sally instead of in the chair."

Uncle Am grinned. "You said she was smart."

"God damn it, you were the one who advised me to—Let's skip it. That's one thing that's haunting me about this damned mess. Unless we find out how Sally died, I'll never know for sure whether it would have made a difference where I slept."

Uncle Am put his hand on my shoulder; he wasn't grinning any more. "Ed, I'm sorry. If it was anybody's fault, it was mine. But hell, we're detectives, not fortunetellers. There's no way we could have known what was going to happen."

"Okay," I said. "Let's skip it. Find anything interesting at Sally's?"

"Not a thing, Ed. Had a nice talk with her landlord—guy named Korbytsky. Willing to talk, but didn't know anything."

"That's the trouble with this case, Uncle Am. Everybody's willing to talk his head off, but nobody knows anything."

"Don't lose sight of one thing, Ed. Maybe there's nothing to know. Anyway, I had a chat with him and then went over Sally's place inch by inch. And as far as I could tell, nobody had been there since Thursday night. Neat three days' accumulation of Chicago dust on every surface, no sign that anything had been messed with. No sign of a booby trap or that there ever had been one. I did one thing; I took away the glasses you and Sally drank out of when you had the nightcap after you got home. They were on the sink in that little corner kitchenette and they were the only things that hadn't been washed, so that's what they were. And I dropped them off at the Kendall Laboratories for analysis of what was left of the contents."

I said, "I watched Sally mix those drinks; there couldn't have been anything in hers that wasn't in mine."

"True, but Sally had a bad heart and you didn't. There may be some drug that would stop hers and that you'd never feel. Something like, nicotine, for instance. It couldn't have been that, of course. Enough nicotine to have done it

would have been tastable in the drinks you had. But maybe there's something else that would do the work and be tasteless. Let's say somebody put a lethal dose in that bottle, figuring Sally would take a dose of Dutch courage before she went to bed, and—How much whisky was there?"

"Enough for two drinks, even."

"All right, half a dose you might not have felt. Especially if it was something that affects the heart. But half a dose could have been plenty for Sally. I didn't bring the empty whisky bottle or the partly empty soda bottle; if there was anything in the drinks it'd show in the unwashed glasses."

"Sure," I said. "But wouldn't an autopsy on Sally be even better?"

"Kid, we're in no position to ask for an autopsy. We haven't any official standing—especially without knowing who our client is. Stanton could request one, but if he's our client he's staying out of it, so pretty obviously he won't request anything. But if the lab report shows there was anything besides whisky, soda and lemon in those glasses, then all we have to do is turn the report over to the police. There'll be an autopsy all right."

I nodded. "And if she did get something, I don't know how it could have been unless it *was* in that drink. We were together all afternoon and evening. And where we went was at random. Did you ask at the lab whether there are drugs that might hurt somebody with heart trouble, but not otherwise?"

"Sure. There are several. Ephedrine, for instance. But if you had a dose of it, you'd probably have noticed it. You didn't by any chance, feel your heart beating faster at any time?"

"No. Unless you could count my first look into Sally's room, and there was cause for it beating a little faster then, I guess. And it was only temporary. Did you look through Sally's papers?"

"Sure, what there were of them. Just routine stuff. Unless you count one stack of love letters. They were pretty hot stuff. All from the same guy, and he signed himself Bill."

"William Haberman," I said. "Stanton mentioned him. He and Sally were going steady for a while and broke up a couple of weeks ago. He lives in Evanston; works for his father, who runs a used-car lot there. He's on my list of people to see. What's with the letters?"

"That's the guy. There are mentions of Evanston and the lot his father runs. The letters are in the envelopes and they range from three months ago to three weeks ago. Apparently they were seeing each other once a week and corresponding in between. Looks like it was a pretty pash affair while it lasted. And no clue, even in the last letter, as to what broke it off. Well, you can find that out if the guy's on your list. What were you doing this afternoon, if anything, outside of your call at the place Sally worked?"

I told him about my talk with Ben Starlock.

While I was talking, I happened to look toward the open window off the fire escape, the window through which our client had come to leave the thousand dollar bill under our blotter.

I said, “Hadn’t we better get a lock for that window, Uncle Am?”

He glanced at it and then chuckled. “So our client won’t steal his money back? Kid, if he can get into that safe, he can sure get through a window to get at it, unless we want to put bars across the window. Aren’t you being—”

I probably was being whatever he was intending to say, but he didn’t finish the sentence because we both heard the hallway door open and close, and it was too soon for Monica Wright to be back from her trip to the insurance company. I went to the connecting door to see who had come in.

A girl stood there, a tallish girl with a generous figure and red hair and everything that goes, or should go, with red hair. I grabbed hold of the edge of the door and felt a cold chill run down my back. The last time I’d seen Sally Doerr, she’d been—

Chapter 6

OF COURSE it was only half a second before I realized that the girl standing there must be Dorothy Doerr, Sally's sister, but it was a bad half second.

After that first shock, I could see that there were differences, at least minor ones, although they looked amazingly alike for sisters who weren't twins. Dorothy's hair, while still classifiable as red, was nearer to brown than Sally's had been; Dorothy's freckles were less noticeable; she was slightly—not much—more slender than Sally. She wore a simple white frock that made her look cool despite the August heat.

"Miss Dorothy Doerr?" I said. "I'm Ed Hunter."

"I'd like to talk to you, Mr. Hunter. May I?"

"Of course. My uncle's here, too. Would you mind talking to both of us?" She said that she wouldn't, and I stepped aside and let her come on into the inner office.

Uncle Am had heard what I'd said, of course, so he was spared the shock I'd got at first sight of her. He came around the desk and held a chair for her just as he'd held one for Sally four days ago. I couldn't help thinking how much this scene was like the one that had happened four days ago. She got out a cigarette, nervously, as Sally had, and I lighted it for her and then I sat down in the same chair I'd sat in to look at Sally.

Uncle Am cleared his throat and said, "Well, Miss Doerr?" and I wondered if he realized that those were exactly the words he'd said to Sally to open our interview with her.

"Mr. Hunter, do you think my sister could possibly have been killed?"

Uncle Am cleared his throat again. "There seems to be no—uh—indication that she was, Miss Doerr."

"Then why did your partner come out to talk to Mr. Stanton yesterday?"

Uncle Am looked at me. "You tell her, Ed. That's your department."

Dorothy Doerr looked at me, too.

I tried to word it carefully. "I don't say, Miss Doerr, I thought your sister's death wasn't a natural one. But the possibility, however small it was, worried me. I don't like coincidences, and there was a coincidence in the fact that she thought she was going to die that night—and she did."

She leaned forward. "Sally had a weak heart—you know that, of course. Do you think there is a possibility that the fact that she thought she was going to die may have—killed her? That she may have worked herself up into a state of fear—over nothing at all—that brought on a heart attack?"

I shook my head slowly, but pretty definitely. I said, "I suppose that's something that could have happened had she been there alone. But I was with her—in the next room, that is. I was still awake. And she seemed satisfied, and not afraid any longer, the minute I agreed to stay. She wouldn't have worked herself up into a state of fear enough to kill her under those circumstances. She seemed quite cheerful and contented when she said good-night to me."

"But if something happened to give her a sudden fright—"

"In that case, yes. That's what I've had in mind; the only thing is that we've been over the place—my uncle just came from there—and we can find no indication that anything could have happened, accidentally or otherwise, to give her a sudden fright. Do you know, Miss Doerr, of any way it could have been done?"

"No, I don't."

"Let me ask you this while you're here. Do you know whether Sally had any enemies? Is there anyone who had any reason whatever to want her dead—either because they disliked her or because they had something to gain through her death?"

"No, Mr. Hunter. No one at all. Sally never hurt anyone, ever. And how would anyone gain? She didn't have any money. I can't see why, but—" Dorothy Doerr nervously stubbed out her cigarette in the ash tray on the desk. "—but I'd like to have it investigated. Would it cost much for you to make a full investigation? I haven't any money but I might be able to borrow some from Uncle Ray."

I passed the buck back to Uncle Am by looking at him. We couldn't have two clients, of course, on the same case, so we'd have to turn down Dorothy's offer. But I left it up to Uncle Am as to whether or not we should tell her that we were already engaged on the case.

He told her. "We already have a client, Miss Doerr. We have been retained for the investigation."

Her eyes widened. "Who?"

"I'm afraid we can't tell you that," Uncle Am said. And quite truly, although of course she'd assume that it was professional secrecy and not ignorance that kept us from telling her.

"It *couldn't* be Gerald," she said. "He's—hi debt. Of course he might have borrowed it from Uncle Ray, but—I don't think he would have. It must be Uncle Ray who hired you, but I don't understand that either. He spent most of this morning trying to convince me that Sally couldn't *possibly* have been killed."

I said, "He wasn't quite that positive about it when I talked to him yesterday."

"Yesterday he was—well, he might say almost anything when he's been drinking. Like he talks about Martians sometimes, as though he really believes in them, when he's been drinking a lot. But he was sober this

morning. He—he didn't hire you while he was drunk, did he?"

That was a toughie to answer, but Uncle Am weasled out of it. He said, "I told you, Miss Doerr, that we can't tell you who our client is. But he was not intoxicated when he hired us."

"But it must be Uncle Ray, and then why did he try to convince me—?" She put a hand to the side of her face and said, "Oh, I think I understand."

We just looked at her, waiting for her to go on, and it worked.

"I—I was telling him about my premonition. That's mostly what I came to you about and why I wanted to hire you to protect me as well as to investigate about Sally, because they're probably the same thing, if you know what I mean, and Uncle Ray would want me not to worry, so—"

She rumbled for another cigarette and I offered her one and then lighted it for her.

Uncle Am was frowning. "What's this about a premonition, Miss Doerr? I'm afraid we don't understand."

"Do you believe in premonitions?"

I got in my answer first, and it was a flat no. But I was thinking about Sally's and I didn't add what I could have added to my answer; I don't believe in premonitions, but I don't like them a damn bit. Especially when they turn out afterwards to have been right.

Uncle Am backed me up. "Of course we don't, Miss Doerr. Premonitions are just superstition."

She was composed again, now. "Are you sure of that, Mr. Hunter? Have you read about Dr. Rhine's experiments in precognition at Duke University? I—have. Uncle Ray is quite interested in parapsychology and got me interested too. We've experimented in it and we both beat the law of averages in precognition, in controlled experiments with cards. Sometimes my scores have been unbelievably high."

You can argue with superstition, I thought, but when they call it parapsychology they've got you stumped.

I looked at Uncle Am again; he was looking at Dorothy Doerr. He cleared his throat. "Do you mean that you now have—or believe that you have—a premonition that something is going to happen to you?"

She nodded slowly, almost reluctantly. "Yes, Mr. Hunter. And I think it's going to happen tonight."

Uncle Am turned around in his chair and looked at me. I knew what he was thinking.

I looked back at him and I thought, *no, damn it, I won't*. I couldn't put it into a glare with Dorothy looking at me too, but I hoped he had enough parapsychology in him somewhere to know what I was thinking.

And damn him, he did. He even winked at me, since Dorothy was looking at my face and not at his.

Then he said, "Miss Doerr," and she turned his way.

"Yes, Mr. Hunter?"

"I'm afraid there's going to be dissension in the ranks. We want to talk to you further, but we'd like to confer privately between ourselves first. Would you mind?"

"Not at all. Shall I wait in the outer office?"

I took her there and gave her a chair and a magazine; for a gag we'd put in copies of the *Police Gazette*, but luckily there was also a copy of *Life* that someone had left and I gave her that.

Then I went back into the inner office and closed the door behind me. The partition was reasonably soundproof; that was one of the first things we'd checked when we'd moved in. Unless we started yelling at one another she wouldn't be able to hear us, even if she came to the door and put her ear against it. But for extra precaution I went over to the far corner and, when Uncle Am followed me, I started the argument not much above a whisper.

"No, Uncle Am," I said. "And you know damn well what I'm saying *no* to."

"All right, Ed. Then we'll call her back in here, talk to her awhile, and let her go. If she turns up dead in the morning it won't be our fault."

He meant it would be *my* fault.

I said, "Listen, you want me to spend the night with her. All right, I'm willing to discuss it to show you the idea isn't any good. We can discuss it from two opposite points of view—first, that Sally died a natural death and second that Sally was murdered."

"Ed, you're arguing with yourself more than with me, but go ahead. Let's hear you convince yourself."

"First, let's say that Sally died strictly a natural death without help from anyone and that her premonition—if you can call a psychotic idea that you're going to be murdered by Martians a premonition—was a coincidence."

"Okay, say it's that way. Then what?"

"Then Dorothy's premonition doesn't mean anything and she doesn't need any protection. Right?"

"Absolutely. But do you take girls out only when they need protection? I seem to remember otherwise."

I ignored that. I said, "And let's take the other alternative. Let's say Sally really was murdered, whether her premonition had anything to do with it or not. What good did I do her, being with her? Sure, I thought she was just off the beam and I wasn't really worried about her, but if I had been worried, what more could I have done? I was wide awake at the time she was killed; I was in the next room, with the door ajar, and a gun handy."

"Sure. In the next room."

"But damn it, Uncle Am, that was your idea. Not that I wouldn't have figured it the same way myself, in that particular case, but—"

"Shhh. You're upping the decibels. All right, I'll concede that point. Neither of us took Sally seriously enough to think she was in any actual danger."

"If you take Dorothy seriously, why don't you protect her?"

He chuckled. "Look at me, Ed; then go look in a mirror. Dorothy wouldn't take *me* seriously. But go ahead and finish your argument. You're backing yourself into a corner and as soon as you find it out, I'll tell you what my idea is."

"I know what your idea is. My point is, I didn't keep Sally from getting killed—if she was killed, I still don't even know how it was done. So how could I protect Dorothy any better?"

"Now you've backed yourself into the corner. Analyze your real reason for blowing up at the idea of protecting Dorothy."

I thought a few seconds. "All right," I said. "I'm scared stiff. If something *does* happen to her in spite of my being with her, I'd—I'd damn near shoot myself."

"And if you don't even *try*, if we send her out of here alone, how are you going to feel tomorrow morning if we learn she's dead? And yes, I'll feel the same way if neither of us tries to protect her and something happens. If you don't try, kid, I will. The only reason I'm trying to talk you into it is that you're better qualified than I am for this particular deal. She'll trust you more and co-operate with you better. And I'm not even suggesting that you seduce the gal—unless you want to and she wants to. You haven't even heard my idea yet. Will you listen?"

"I'll listen," I said.

"If we're going to protect her, we'll have to assume that someone is going to try to kill her. But if he can't find her, he can't kill her, can he? But if nobody knows where you are, how can there be any danger?"

I started to interrupt, but he held up a hand to stop me. "Sure, the Stantons would worry if you didn't let them know, but you can let them know without telling even them where she'll be. Here's the setup. First, you take her for a drink and to dinner—like you did Sally, but not to the same places. Then, since it's going to be a hot evening, you suggest that you rent a car and go for a drive, somewhere out of the heat of the city. So far, okay?"

"Okay, but carry on and keep it clean."

"On that drive you sell Dorothy on the idea that nobody can hurt her if nobody besides you knows where she is. Talk her into hiding out overnight for her own protection. And stop somewhere and let her call the Stantons and tell them anything—the truth or otherwise; it doesn't matter—that'll keep them from worrying about her. But don't stay wherever you call from; the call might be traced. And after you've moved on, be sure she doesn't put in another call after that, with or without you knowing about it.

"I think, Ed, that a motel would be the best bet, if only for that reason; very few of them have phones in the individual cabins. Pick one that hasn't. And don't go to sleep. I don't care whether you do guard duty inside the cabin or whether you sit in the car outside and watch the door, but stay awake and don't let anything happen that shouldn't."

I said, "You're really taking this damn seriously, aren't you?"

"Why not, if we're doing it at all? Luckily, we've got a big enough retainer that we don't have to worry about expenses like renting cars or paying motel rooms. And whoever hired us to investigate Sally's death would consider keeping Dorothy alive even more important. For that matter, I do myself."

I said, "You're right, Uncle Am. And I'm sorry for popping off. But if anything *does* happen to Dorothy—"

"Ed, if you take every precaution you can think of—and I can think of—it won't be your fault. I'll slap you down if you think it is. Just don't miss any bets anywhere. Be sure no one follows you or can possibly trace you. Be sure Dorothy doesn't know where she's going to stay when she makes that first call and doesn't make another call after she does know." 68

He looked at me very seriously. "Ed, if someone did murder Sally, he's damn clever." He put out his hand. "Good luck, kid."

From his face, I knew that Dorothy wasn't the only one with a premonition. He was really worried.

I got expense money out of the safe and locked it again. I said, "I'll take her to Ireland's to eat. If anything comes up, you can reach me there."

"Okay, but after that don't let even me know where you're going to be."

Dorothy Doerr didn't seem to have been annoyed by the length of time we'd been talking. She agreed readily to have a cocktail with me, and over the cocktail it wasn't hard to talk her into having dinner. She said she'd intended to stay downtown for dinner anyway, and, then maybe cool off with a quick swim in the lake after the sun went down.

We took our time over a second drink and then took a cab to Ireland's. I made sure—as sure as one can in Loop traffic—that we weren't followed there.

I wanted confirmation from another source about the property she and Sally had inherited in Colorado and led the conversation around to it. I got the same story, without any deviations or important additions, that Stanton had told me. Both the girls had seen the geologist's report, and they'd both agreed not to sell for the small amount that the rancher with adjacent property had offered.

Over our salads, I pumped her about her childhood and got her account, to compare with Sally's, of the events of the night when both their parents had died. It was the same as her sister's had been.

"How close were you and Sally, Dorothy?"

"Well—I suppose not really close, for sisters. Oh, we were good friends and saw one another often enough. But when we were younger, the two years' difference in our ages put us into different groups. And then, lately, with Sally working and living away from home, and with me going to college, I guess we got even a little farther apart."

"How often, about, did you see one another?"

"Once a week, maybe. Sometimes a little oftener. About half the time it

would be when Sally would come home for dinner or a visit, and about half of the time when I came into town and we'd eat somewhere together and probably take in a movie."

"Did you often eat at Sally's apartment?"

"No, Sally didn't cook many meals there. Her own breakfasts, but not much else. The cooking facilities were pretty poor—and Sally hated cooking and housework anyway. She almost always ate out, unless she just wanted to make herself a sandwich or something light."

"Did you ever stay overnight with her?"

"Just once—no, twice. One night last winter when there was a pretty bad blizzard and traffic got tied up during the evening when we were seeing a show and chances looked pretty dun for my getting back to Rogers Park. The other time—" She smiled. "The other time was last fall, one evening when we spent the evening at her place and we had a bottle and I—drank a little too much and got too sleepy to want to go home. So Sally phoned them and said I was staying and she told them it was because I'd sprained my ankle. And I had to pretend to limp a little around home for the next couple of days."

"When did you see her last, Dorothy?"

"Sunday evening. She came out to the Stantons' during the afternoon and to stay for dinner. I wasn't there when she came, but I got home in time for dinner, and after dinner Sally and I went downtown to a show—to the State-Lake. We didn't get out of the show until after eleven, so we parted in front of the theater. Sally wanted to stop somewhere for a drink and a sandwich—and she was starting her vacation the next day so that was all right for her, but I had to get up early to study for an examination, so I went on home."

"Did she act unusual in any way?"

"No, not at all. She was a little annoyed that, with a week's, vacation coming up, she didn't feel she could afford to go anywhere and would have to spend it in Chicago. She said she had a hundred dollars in the bank but that she couldn't possibly spend it to go away because she was going to need a lot of new clothes for fall and winter and wouldn't have time to save up for them if she spent all her money on a vacation."

"She didn't seem afraid of anything?"

"No, Ed. She seemed pretty cheerful, except, as I said, about having to stay in Chicago for her vacation."

"Did she say anything about—Martians?"

"No, not a word."

"And that was the last time you talked to her? I mean, there weren't any phone calls between you?"

"No, none. That was the last time I saw her, last Sunday evening, and the last time I heard from her."

We were having dessert by then and I thought I might as well start leading up to Uncle Am's idea. I asked her if she had any plans for the rest of the evening.

“Well, I really *should* study, but—”

“But what would you rather do?”

“I told you, Ed, that I wanted to go swimming. It’s so hot and muggy; it’d be a wonderful evening for it. Do you swim?”

“Not very well,” I admitted. “But it does sound like a good idea for this evening. Only the beaches right in town will be jammed. Suppose I rent a car and drive us out along the lake somewhere outside of town. How does that sound?”

“Wonderful.”

A waiter came up to our table. “Pardon me, sir. Are you Mr. Hunter?” There was a phone call for me; I excused myself and went to the booth.

It was Uncle Am, of course. “How are you doing, Ed? Brought up the idea yet?”

“As far as a drive out of town. I haven’t suggested anything beyond that.”

“Good. I’ve had a couple of ideas since I saw you. First, I’m going out to the Stantons’ this evening and—”

“Hey,” I said, “that reminds me. I made an appointment with Wernecke, told him I’d be out around eight o’clock tonight. Will you call it off for me?”

“I’ll keep it for you. And I want to talk to Stanton, too, if he’s there. You’ve seen both of them and I haven’t met either. But what I started to say, I’m going to tell the Stantons about Dorothy’s coming to us and about her premonition that something’s going to happen to her tonight. And I’m going to tell them that, on our advice, she’s in hiding for the night; that we told her to hide somewhere and not let anyone, even us, know where she is. So you can skip the phone call business. It’ll be all squared and explained in advance that she won’t be home tonight.”

“Which will make us look like damn fools if I can’t talk her into it,” I said.

“Hell, kid, you can talk her into it. And listen—and get this; it might be important. If her death is planned for tonight, be sure she doesn’t take it along with her. *Look* through her purse, either secretly or openly; it doesn’t matter which. Confiscate any aspirin tablets or sleeping pills or anything else she might have with her that she might take or use during the evening or before turning in. Buy her replacements, ones you know are okay.”

“Good idea. Any other ideas?”

“Nope. Monica Wright got the job at the insurance company. Came back a little after you left and I had a talk with her and explained what we wanted her to do and what kind of questions to ask and how to ask them, and stuff like that. I think she’ll do a good job. She’s a smart girl.”

“Yeah. I don’t think there’s anything to get there at the insurance company—damned if I see any motive that could tie in with Sally’s job, but we’ve got to try everything.”

“She starts the job tomorrow morning. I told her to pretend to have known Sally so it’ll be natural for her to ask more questions about her than she could otherwise. And from your reports that you dictated to her, she’ll know enough

about Sally to carry through the pretense.”

“Where are you calling from?”

“The office, Ed. Why?”

“I was just thinking. Before you tell the Stantons that Dorothy won’t be home tonight, I might as well put the rest of the idea to her and make sure. Give me fifteen minutes and I’ll make sure.”

“Hell, kid, *I’m* sure. And I’m hungry, I want to get out of here and feed my face. I stuck around this long because Monica decided she could finish the report here before she left and I waited for it. I got it now, and I’m going to study it while I eat. I can talk to Stanton and Wernecke better after I’ve studied your conversations with them.”

“Okay,” I said, “but you’ll feel foolish if I fall flat on my face in talking Dorothy into staying out all night.”

“You won’t fall flat on your face.”

I didn’t fall flat on my face. In fact, I didn’t even have to try to talk Dorothy into anything at all. When I got back to the table she said, “Ed, I’m going to make a phone call. Will you excuse me a minute?”

“Sure,” I told her. “But—if I’m supposed to be sort of protecting you while I’m with you, may I ask who you’re phoning?”

“The Stantons. I—maybe I’m being silly, Ed, but I’m afraid. I’m not going home tonight. I—I want to stay somewhere where nobody will know where I am. Just in case.”

I laughed a little and told her that she wouldn’t have to phone and told her what Uncle Am’s idea had been.

Chapter 7

DOROTHY PUT her hand on top of mine on the table. “That’s wonderful, Ed. I’m so glad that I won’t have to phone home. It would have been so hard to explain; it would have sounded as though I didn’t trust them, and I do. It’s just that—oh, I’m so all mixed up about it. I don’t really know what I think.”

“Don’t think at all,” I told her.

“Where are you going to take me?”

“I don’t even know myself. Neither of us is going to know in advance. We’ll stop somewhere at random.”

“You’ll let me pay for things? The car rental and other expenses?”

I shook my head firmly. “We’ve got a client. I’m not kidding you about that. And we’ve got enough of a retainer to let us charge all expenses against it, from this dinner on down the line.”

“Is it Gerald, Ed? Or is it Uncle Ray?”

I said, “Honestly, Dorothy, I can’t tell you that. I wish I could.” And I *did* wish that I could, although she wouldn’t take that the way I meant it. I wished, even more, that I knew why our client wanted to remain anonymous.

“Well,” Dorothy said, “it’s got to be one or the other of them—there’s nobody else that could possibly be interested. I don’t suppose it matters a lot which of them it is.”

“Which of them do you like best, Dorothy?”

“Why—I hardly know. I get along fine with both of them. Uncle Ray is the more interesting, and he gives me a lot of help in my college work. I’m taking a psychology major, you know, and he really does know psychology. All of his ideas aren’t orthodox, but they’re at least interesting. Especially in parapsychology, things like the Dr. Rhine experiments.”

“You mean guessing those cards with squares and circles and triangles and stuff?”

“Yes. I’ve—well, doubled the number of right guesses that the law of averages would give me. And trying it in a light trance state I’ve done even better.”

“Any of the rest of the family interested hi—uh—parapsychology?”

“Oh, Gerald’s tried it a little, but he doesn’t seem to have any extra-sensory perception at all so he lost interest. And Eva won’t even try it; she’s not interested at all.”

“How about the quiz kid, Dickie?”

She made a little grimace. “Not interested either. He thinks Ray and I are

both crazy. Right now he's interested only in the physical sciences. Chemistry and electricity, mostly."

"Is he really a prodigy?"

"I wouldn't go that far, but he's a darned smart kid. Two or three years ahead of his age, at least. Next semester I'm taking a course in I. Q. tests; if Dickie will cooperate with me, I'll find out just how smart he really is."

"Sally didn't like him," I prompted.

"I'm afraid I don't either, too well. He's a little on the smarty-pants side. But maybe he'll outgrow it. And I can get along with him all right; knowing psychology helps me there."

We'd finished our coffee by then and I called for the check. But I remembered, before we got up to leave, what Uncle Am had suggested about Dorothy's purse. I explained to her.

Her eyes widened a little but she handed the purse over without protest. I looked through it carefully. I confiscated, with the promise to buy replacements, half a pack-*acre* of Life Savers and a little bottle of what she explained were caffeine tablets to keep her awake if she got sleepy in class or if she had to study late for an examination. The only other thing that looked even remotely dangerous was a lipstick. I decided I might as well be really thorough and confiscated that, too.

We took a cab to a rent-a-car place in the Loop, and as far as I could tell nobody had followed us. I'd make really sure of that before we got out of town. I rented an almost new Chewie two-door and drove over to the lake and south along the drive.

"Any special place in mind, Ed?" she asked me.

I shook my head. "And I wouldn't tell you if I did have one. It doesn't matter, does it?"

"I guess not. Drive carefully, will you, Ed? I—well, if we had an accident it would be just as bad as if—something else happened."

She was really jittery. I hadn't been driving very fast, but I slowed down just the same.

Traffic is too thick on the main streets of Chicago to be sure that you're not being followed, but after we were south of Jackson Park I cut off Stony Island Avenue and did zigzagging through the byways. No car could possibly have followed us without staying in sight, and none stayed in sight.

To make triply sure, although I was beginning to feel ridiculous about all the precautions I was taking, I stayed away from the lake until we were through Hammond. Then I worked my way back to the lake, but I was lost myself by then. If anyone, anyone at all, knew where we were or could find us now, he was smarter than I was. I relaxed.

"Like a drink, Dorothy?" I asked her.

"Well—yes. But don't forget that swim you promised me. And let's keep going for a while; the farther from Chicago I get, the better I feel. I'll tell you what."

“What?”

“Before the liquor stores close, let’s pick up a bottle. We can have a drink whenever we want it then. And we can use it for a nightcap after we stop somewhere for the night.”

“Swell,” I said. I wondered if she meant that the way it had sounded, but there wasn’t any hurry in finding out.

In fact, it was nice to wonder.

I stopped at a drugstore in the next little town we came to and bought a bottle of Bourbon. And because it was too hot a night to drink whisky warm and straight—and because with a thousand-dollar retainer I didn’t have to be careful of expenses—I sank an extra five bucks into a quart thermos bottle and had the druggist fill it with cracked ice and water, and I bought two glasses.

Dorothy looked surprised when I came back to the car and handed the things to her. “You be bartender,” I told her.

“Ed, are you trying to *throw* money away?”

I grinned at her as I started the car. “Why not? The money came from Mars.”

“What do you mean, Ed?”

“Just kidding,” I said. “I’ve been wanting to buy myself a thermos bottle for a long time and this seemed like a good time to do it. It’s too hot a night to drink lukewarm drinks. And besides, I’m beginning to like you. Isn’t that something to celebrate?”

“Maybe it is, Ed. I’m beginning to like you too.”

“Then make us each a drink. I’ll drive slowly.”

“No, pull off the road. We’ll need three hands to mix the drinks because there’s nothing I can put a glass down on while I’m opening and pouring.”

I pulled off the road just outside of town and turned on the dome light so we could see to pour the drinks. I held both glasses while she did the pouring.

Then we touched glasses and each took a sip and it tasted fine. I turned the dome light back off and moved the drink to my left hand so I could put my arm around her. I kissed her lips gently, and it tasted better than the drink. Much better.

It tasted so wonderful that I found myself wondering if it was too early to suggest that we push on and start looking for a place to stay. I glanced at the luminous dial of my wrist watch; it was a little after ten o’clock.

She saw the gesture. “What time is it, Ed?”

“Five after ten. When we finish these drinks should we start looking for a place to stay? Or would you rather we drove a while longer first?”

“I—I still would like to take a swim first, Ed. Just a quick one. Do you know where we are? Is there a beach near here where we could rent suits?”

“I know where we are only roughly. But this road runs right along the lake; it’s just the other side of those dunes, I guess. We could see it from a little way back. Maybe if we keep on driving we’ll come to a beach.”

“There’s plenty of moonlight, Ed. Let’s walk back between the dunes. It looks pretty deserted along here. If there are no houses and no people in sight, maybe—”

“All right,” I said. “As soon as we finish our drinks. But maybe we won’t have to walk. I’ll go ahead a little and maybe there’ll be a side road through the dunes that’ll take us to the shore.”

“All right, Ed. And there’s no hurry if we don’t have to find a public beach that’s still open, so maybe that’s better.”

I slid my arm around her again and she leaned back against me. Chicago seemed awfully far away; danger seemed even farther, impossibly far. There was only the warm night, just warm enough now to be pleasant, and the warmth of Dorothy’s body leaning back against me. We finished our drinks leisurely and we didn’t talk because there wasn’t any need to talk.

After a while I gave Dorothy my glass to hold and started the Chewie. I’d guessed right, there was a turn-off into the dunes, a little-used road, only a few hundred yards from where we’d been parked.

I turned into it and found that it rapidly tapered into almost no road at all, just tire marks in the soft sand. For a while I thought I wasn’t going to be able to make it, but I did. Or the Chewie did. We rounded a dune and there was Lake Michigan, the waves lapping in gently onto a smooth, enticing beach. Far out over it hung the full moon, so bright and beautiful that it hardly seemed real. I parked facing it, so we could watch it through the windshield.

No one was in sight; there wasn’t even a boat out on all those miles of water.

“Guess it’s private enough here,” I said. “But let’s have one more drink, and if we don’t see anyone by then—”

We made short ones, but we sipped them leisurely and talked about nothing in particular and then I said, “By the way, Dorothy, I’m a pretty mediocre swimmer. The length of a swimming pool and back is about my limit. You aren’t planning on swimming out any distance, are you?”

“Oh, no. I’m not a distance swimmer either. I probably won’t swim out of my depth at all; I just want to get wet and cool off.”

“Okay, then. Just didn’t want to take any chances. Especially right now.”

“Why especially right now?” Then she laughed. “Oh, I see what you mean.”

I turned her face toward mine and kissed her again. Her lips moved under mine and then she pulled away. “After our swim, Ed. In a few minutes. I feel so hot and sticky.”

She reached for the top button of her dress and then took her hand away. “Would you mind, Ed, if you undress outside the car and me inside? It would be crowded for both of us and—besides, I’d feel funny about *it*.”

“Sure,” I said. I kissed her once more and then got out of the car. I undressed alongside it, so I could spread my clothes over the fenders.

Dorothy beat me, though, and came out of the car before I’d finished. She

stood waiting for me, her body bright *in* the moonlight. Like a lady, she didn't watch. But I must not have been a gentleman; I couldn't keep my eyes away from her.

Her body was just like—but I didn't want to think of Sally's body, lying cold and dead on the bed in her apartment. I let myself think of Dorothy's body—not a difficult thing to do—to forget Sally's. I put my arms around Dorothy's body and pulled her to me and we kissed, but after a moment she pushed me away gently. "After our dip, Ed," she whispered. "You can wait that long, can't you?"

I couldn't but I said that I could.

We walked down the gently sloping beach to the water and the gentle wash of the waves came to our ankles, our knees, finally—it must have been thirty or forty yards out—up to our chests. The water was cold but it felt fine. And, right then, I needed cold water.

I glanced back toward shore and saw something that I hadn't seen—I couldn't have, from the beach, because it was just beyond a dune that came very close to the water; there was a small house built there, with a porch, and there were three people sitting on the porch.

Obviously they were watching us and had been able to see us from the time we'd got out into the water as far as knee-deep, and I swore a little to myself. But, equally obviously, they weren't going to do anything about it besides being amused, so I didn't embarrass Dorothy by calling them to her attention. She'd see them on the way back, of course, but there was no use spoiling her swim by telling her now, now that we'd come this far.

Dorothy had lowered her shoulders into the water and was striking off. She laughed back at me over her shoulder and said, "Come on, Ed; let's swim out to the raft." She was kidding, of course, because there wasn't any raft.

I started swimming after her, but she swam faster, and I was losing distance. After about thirty yards of it—which is about as far as I can swim and be sure of getting back—she was a long distance ahead of me; only by bobbing myself up in the water could I see her head.

"Come back, Dorothy," I called out. "This is as far as I can make it."

She called back and her voice sounded faint and tired; I could barely make it out. "Just to the raft, Ed. Got to get there to rest before I can swim back."

Water got into my mouth when I tried to call again and it was a minute before I could yell again. "Dorothy, come back!"

There wasn't any answer and I called again and then I turned in the water, toward where people had been sitting on the porch of a house, and this time I was glad that they were there. I yelled, "*Help! Got a boat?*"

And they had one all right; they were already bringing it. Two men were carrying a canoe from around behind the house and what I thought from that distance was a man, but later learned was a woman in slacks, was running from the porch down to the edge of the water.

So with help coming, I turned back again and yelled to Dorothy to stop and

turn back, but there wasn't any answer and I started swimming out toward where I'd seen her last, my arms and legs feeling as though they were made of lead and with the taste of cold water in my mouth, strangling me so I couldn't yell any more, either toward Dorothy or toward the shore.

That went on for hours, for weeks, and then I was still struggling, but my head was under water instead of above it, and I was breathing water instead of air. And the moonlight was gone and there was blackness and nothing.

And then I was lying on the sand, with the murmur of water and the murmur of voices in my ears, and a woman was bending over me. She was wet and she was naked except for a pair of step-ins, but she wasn't Dorothy. She was big and muscular and her hair was black, stringy from the water.

I tried to raise myself on one elbow, but it wouldn't work just yet. My chest ached and I felt sick at my stomach. Nothing happened at all the first time I tried to use my voice and I retched a few seconds. Then my voice was a croak, but I could use it; I could get a few words out.

"Dorothy? They get her?"

The big woman said, "Take it easy, son. We got her. But I'm afraid—it was too late."

Chapter 8

I STRUGGLED again and this time, as the woman stepped back, I got to a sitting position. I was facing the water and ahead of me, past the woman, I could see the beached canoe and I could see the shirt, shoes and slacks that the woman had shed at the edge of the water. She must, I realized, be a really expert swimmer; she must have brought me out of the water while the men in the canoe went out farther to get Dorothy.

"Are you all right?" she asked, watching me. She didn't seem to be aware that she wore practically nothing and that I wore less. I wasn't aware of it then, either. I turned to where the other voices, the men's voices, came from.

About five yards up the beach, they were working on Dorothy; she was lying on her stomach, her face turned toward me and supported by the crook of her elbow. One of the men was straddling her, applying artificial respiration. Something in the way he did it gave me the idea that he knew what he was doing.

The big woman dropped on her knees on the sand beside me and put her hand on my shoulder. She said, "Take it easy; there's nothing you can do. Bill—that's my son—went for help and for a pulmotor; there's a Coast Guard station four miles away and they've got one. He took your car; ours is shut in the garage and he could get going in yours quicker."

I managed to get to my feet and to stagger over to where the two men were working on Dorothy. The one who was applying respiration didn't look up. The other one looked at me and shook his head.

"She's gone," he said. "We don't think there's a chance, but we'll keep on trying. We won't stop this till the pulmotor gets here."

The woman had joined me; she took hold of my arm. She said, "Put your clothes on. You're shivering because you're suffering from shock."

I was, I realized; my teeth were clicking like dice in a dice box. And she must have been right about its being from shock; she herself wasn't shivering at all.

She led me a little way and I saw my clothes lying on the sand where her son must have swept them off the fender of the car before starting it.

"Put them on," she said. "Hurry up."

She talked to me as though I was a child. When I didn't make any move to obey she picked up my trousers and handed them to me. "Put them on. And your suit coat. Don't worry about the accessories. Then come to the house. I'll start some coffee."

She watched to see that I started dressing and then went away, picking up her own clothes where she had dropped them, but not bothering to put them on.

Once I started dressing I kept on, automatically, and it was something to do. When I finished I walked back through the sand to where the men were working on Dorothy. The other man was taking a turn now while the first one watched.

I saw that they were both soaking wet, although neither of them had taken off any of their clothes. They must have tipped the canoe trying to get her into it and had probably swum in, using the capsized canoe as a float to help them bring Dorothy.

“Get to the house,” one of the men said, and he seemed to be talking to me. “You’re in bad shape yourself, son.”

I wasn’t in any shape at all; I wasn’t feeling, either with my mind or my body. I was still shivering, but I didn’t feel cold. I didn’t feel at all.

I heard a car coming, fast, along the road the other side of the dunes and then heard it slow down and turn our way, but I didn’t realize what the car was or what it had to do with me, and I was all mixed up as to who it was lying there dead and naked on the beach, whether it was a girl named Sally or a girl named Dorothy or whether they were one and the same girl and I’d been protecting her twice and had let her get killed both times.

The man who was standing took hold of my arm. He said, “Come on, I’ll take you there. You damn near drowned, yourself, and you’ve had a nasty shock. You need some coffee with brandy in it. The pulmotor’s almost here now.”

Vaguely, I wondered what he was talking about. I tried to think of what a pulmotor was and I couldn’t remember. I was being pushed forward and I seemed to be wading in knee-deep sand; then the sand was pressing against my body and I put my head down on the gritty softness of it and closed my eyes, and when I opened them again there was a ceiling over my head. It was daylight and I was lying between sheets in a bed.

Uncle Am was sitting there in a chair beside the bed and I looked at him but didn’t say anything.

He said, “Take it easy, kid. You’re all right.”

“Dorothy? She’s dead?”

He nodded. “But don’t blame yourself, Ed. What happened wasn’t your fault. You did every damned thing you could. You tried your damndest to die with her.”

“It was my fault. I should have—”

“Shut up,” he said. “It’s not going to do any good blaming yourself. It *wasn’t* your fault. Get that through your head first. I don’t want you ever again to think that or say that.”

I didn’t answer.

The chair he was sitting in was a rocker; it creaked as he leaned forward.

"Is your mind clear, Ed?"

"I guess so," I told him.

"Then listen hard. For just a minute. I promised Mrs. Auslander—that's the woman who dragged you out of the drink—that I'd let her know the minute you came around. She's worried about you.

"But get this first, before you talk to her. There's no use complicating things by telling anyone here any more than you have to do. I don't mean you have to tell any lies—just leave out the background. You had a date with Dorothy; you took a drive out of town; you stopped here to spoon and decided to cool off with a dip in the lake. That's all."

"All right, but that's not all."

"It's what happened, isn't it? Sure, I learned from the Auslanders that there was something about the girl calling out that she was going to swim to a raft that wasn't there. We'll talk about that later. But for here and now, they figure that it was an optical illusion, that she saw a floating log or something way out and thought it was a raft."

I said, "It was bright moonlight. I could see out for half a mile or more; there wasn't anything there."

"Kid, I'll argue it with you later. All I'm trying to get across to you right now is this—why tangle the Auslanders in any mess. They saved your life. They tried their best to save Dorothy's."

"All right," I said. "How soon can we leave?"

"Four hours. The doctor said you should stay in bed at least four hours after whatever time you woke up, and that if you felt all right then, you could get up."

"I feel all right now."

Uncle Am stood up. "Don't be a sap. If you get out of that bed sooner than four hours from now, I'll knock you back into it. Okay, I'll get Mrs. Auslander."

He went out of the room and a minute later the big woman came in. She wore slacks and a T-shirt and sandals. She carried a cup of steaming black coffee.

She smiled at me and said, "Hi, Ed."

The coffee looked good and I raised myself on one elbow to sip it. "Thanks a lot," I said. "And I don't mean only for the coffee."

"You aren't the first one I've pulled out of Lake Michigan, Ed. To be exact, you're the fifth."

"You must be an expert swimmer."

"Used to be. I've got trophies to prove it. And I can still swim five miles before breakfast. Drink that coffee while it's hot enough to scald your gizzard, and then I'll make you some breakfast."

I sipped at the coffee. It was too hot to do more than that.

"Seriously," I said, "I don't know how I can ever thank you for pulling me out."

“Don’t be silly, young man. I’ve got to get my exercise somehow. We’re only sorry that—” She bit her lip and stopped. “But you probably don’t want to talk about that yet.”

I said, “I do, Mrs. Auslander. And it may sound like a funny thing to ask, but I’d like you to tell me exactly what happened from start to finish. There are parts I don’t remember very well.”

“All right, Ed.” She sat down in the rocking chair. “For one thing, there wasn’t any of it that you should blame yourself for or that you could have helped. In fact, you tried your best to get yourself drowned too. How far can you swim?”

“I don’t know exactly. A hundred yards or so, I guess.”

“I pulled you in from a good two hundred yards out and you were still trying to swim—with your head under water most of the time. I had to knock you out to keep you from fighting me off. How’s your jaw?”

I touched it and found that it was a little sore. So many of my muscles were sore that I hadn’t noticed it.

“It’s all right,” I said. “But will you start at the beginning, Mrs. Auslander, and go through things just the way they happened?”

“Sure, Ed. And call me Becky. I learned your name from the identification you were carrying, and that’s how we got in touch with your uncle. But all right, from the beginning.

“We were sitting on the porch, almost ready to turn in; it was about half past ten. My husband and his brother who’s visiting us and I, three of us. My son Bill—he’s eighteen—was in the house. We heard your car drive up along the other side of the dune. We didn’t pay any attention because a car cuts in there every once in a while; it’s a beautiful view of the lake and couples come there to spoon—and sometimes, like you did, to take a dip in the lake. We’re used to that.

“So we weren’t shocked when we saw the two of you go down to the lake and go in. In fact, we thought you looked like a couple of nice kids. And bathing suits are a nuisance anyway unless you’re on a public beach. Anyhow, you both walked out till you were shoulder deep and then I saw you turn and see us—you turned our direction, anyway, and you must have seen us sitting there because you called to us later.”

I nodded. “Yes, I saw you then.”

“Then you started to swim, both of you, with the girl ahead. Voices carry well over the water at night so we heard her call back to you ‘Come on, let’s swim to the raft.’ There wasn’t any raft, we knew, but we thought she was kidding—or that it was a private joke or something. Then you both swam out a way, with the girl getting farther ahead of you; she must have been a slightly better swimmer than you are. And we heard you call to her to come back. We heard her call back something about a raft again; we didn’t get the exact words. Then you called ‘Come back’ again, and when she didn’t, you turned and yelled to us for help.”

That far, I knew, and it fitted what I remembered. I nodded and said, "Go on."

"George and Harvey ran around the house and got the canoe and I ran down to the water, peeling on the way, and started out swimming. When I got to you, you were still more or less afloat but you were starting to drown, so I grabbed you. The men in the boat went on out after the girl, but she was way out by then and she'd gone down.

"It took them about ten minutes to find her and—well, it was too late and they knew that by the time they got her in to shore. But they kept on giving respiration until the men from the Coast Guard got here with the pulmotor."

"I remember the sound of the car coming back," I said. "I go blank from there. Did I walk to the house or—wait, I think I remember falling into the sand."

"You did. While the Coast Guard boys worked on the girl with the pulmotor, George and Harvey carried you into the house here. We put you to bed and got a doctor, and then we looked through your pockets for identification and phoned your uncle in Chicago, and he came out."

"What time is it now?"

"About eight o'clock. Your uncle got here at about four, with the Stantons."

"The Stantons? They're here?"

"No, they've left. We called your uncle while the Coast Guard men were still working on the girl and before we got around to looking for the girl's purse and identification in your car, but your uncle said he knew who the girl was and that he'd notify her guardians. So they came with him—or he came with them, rather; it was in their car.

"But by four o'clock when they got here, the girl's body had already been taken to a mortician's place in town, and the Stantons stayed here just long enough to learn what had happened, and then they went into town to make arrangements to have the body sent back to Chicago."

"How did they—feel about things?"

"I guess they were pretty broken up; they'd lost their other ward, this girl's sister, less than a week ago. Heart trouble. But if you mean, did they blame you or think it was even partly your fault, no, Ed. I explained just how it happened and how you tried to get her to come back and then tried your best to drown yourself swimming out after her.

"Oh, and Ed, don't cross me up on one point of my story if and when you ever talk to the Stantons about it. I lied to them about one little thing."

"What was that, Mrs. Auslander?"

"The name is Becky. Well, Ed, I didn't know how strict people the Stantons might be or what they thought the girl's morals were or how badly they'd be shocked by the two of you swimming raw, so I doctored that up a little to save their feelings. Before the girl was taken into town I found her bra and panties in your car, and I wet them in the lake and put them on her. And

our story was that you'd gone swimming in your shorts and she in her panties and bra."

I said, "Becky, you're wonderful. One woman out of a million would have done that."

"Phooey. One out of a thousand would have. Finished that coffee? Good." She took the empty cup from me. "Now I'll get you some breakfast."

"Thanks, but I don't want any, please."

"You'll eat some just the same."

From the look in her eyes, I knew I'd have to try. I said, "By the way, how did you tell it to Uncle Am about our swimming costumes?"

She laughed a little. "He doesn't look to me like the sort of man who'd shock easily. He got it straight, after the Stantons left. Now lie there and rest till I cook you a breakfast. And it's going to be a big one and you're going to eat it if I have to ram it down your throat with the handle of a canoe paddle. You and your Martians!"

"My *what*?" I sat straight up in bed.

"Martians. You raved about them twice last night in your sleep. You were dreaming that they were killing people and you couldn't figure out how they did it. Now lie down."

I lay back down. She went out and I found that I was plenty tired enough to lie back and close my eyes. My mind was still fuzzy and I tried not to think.

After a little while Mrs. Auslander brought in breakfast and Uncle Am came in with it. He kept up a stream of conversation while I ate, but none of it was about the Doerr girls or the Stantons. He was trying to keep my mind off the case until I felt better.

But I felt too low mentally to enjoy listening. I broke into the middle of a story he was telling about a carney blow-down to ask him if there were going to be any formalities before we could go back to Chicago.

He said, "Nothing worth mentioning, Ed. As one of several witnesses to a drowning, they want you to stop in and make a brief statement and sign it. But they've already released the body to the Stantons, so it's just a formality."

He didn't try to go back to the story he'd been telling; he just sat and watched me finish eating.

After I'd finished, I tried to talk him into our leaving right away, but I couldn't get anywhere with it. I had to follow the doctor's orders down to the last minute of that four hours, and since I'd awakened about seven-thirty, I had to lie there until half past eleven. And they wouldn't give me my clothes, which Mrs. Auslander had brushed and pressed for me, so there wasn't anything I could do but wait it out. Mrs. Auslander took Uncle Am away when she took the breakfast dishes and insisted that I try to sleep again for a few hours.

There wasn't anything else to do so I tried, and to my surprise I succeeded. Some automatic clock in my brain waked me just a minute before eleven-thirty.

I got my clothes then, and we had to talk Mrs. Auslander out of making us a lunch before we started back. We got away a few minutes before noon.

Uncle Am insisted on driving. I'd rather have driven myself for something to do to keep my thoughts from going in such circles, but I felt too lousy to put up an argument about it. We stopped in the little town where I'd bought the whisky and the thermos jug the night before.

The sheriff was out to lunch when we went to the courthouse and his office, so we had a little lunch too to kill some time.

He was in when we came back. He was nice about it. I answered a few questions and signed a brief statement and that was that.

After we were heading for Chicago again Uncle Am said, "All right, Ed, do you feel ready to talk?"

"I guess so."

"I know everything that happened after the two of you started walking out into the water. But tell me, if you're ready, everything that happened from the moment you left the office with Dorothy. Even, as near as you can remember it, everything that was said."

I sighed and started talking; it took quite a while.

Finally I was through and Uncle Am said, "Kid, you didn't miss a bet anywhere. I don't see a thing you could have done that you didn't do."

He thought for a minute. "By the way, when Dorothy was in our office yesterday afternoon she said she was with Ray Wernecke in the morning that day. You didn't happen to ask her from what time to what time it was she was with him, did you?"

"No, why? What would it matter?"

"It might tell us something. It was yesterday morning—at ten o'clock on the head—that our client telephoned us. If Dorothy and Wernecke were together at ten and if she'd been sure he didn't use the telephone then, we could be sure it was Stanton who called. Sure, we think it was Stanton anyway, but *if* we could have eliminated Wernecke, we'd be positive."

"Right," I said. "I was stupid or I'd have thought of that."

"Then I've been stupid too. I didn't think of it myself until just now. How do you feel by now?"

"Okay," I said, and then decided I might as well be honest and corrected myself. "I mean, I'm okay physically. Mentally, I feel lousy. I want to crawl behind the woodwork."

"Let's stop for a drink."

I said, "It won't hurt and it might help, but we're almost to the Loop; let's turn in the car first and get rid of it."

We did, and then we stopped in a bar and had a drink and it helped a little. Not much.

I said, "Listen, Uncle Am, I'll swallow one coincidence if I have to, but not two of them. Those girls were murdered. All right, maybe it's not my fault that they were, maybe somebody is too clever for me to have stopped him.

But I'm going to get him for it. If I don't, I'm through with this racket. I'm going back to being a carney or something."

"How, kid? I mean, how could they have been murdered?"

"I've got a vague idea on one of them—damned vague. Not the slightest idea on the other one. And if you don't mind, the one idea I have got is—well, I'd rather not talk about it until it jells a little."

I looked at my watch. "It's about a quarter after three. Have we got any plans?"

"Well, I phoned Frank Bassett from the Auslanders' and made a date for us to take him to dinner tonight. We meet him at half past six in the Blackstone lobby. And after that I had in mind that maybe one of us should look up Monica Wright. This was her first day in Sally's job and she probably hasn't got anything, but we can find out how it goes and maybe give her a few more steers on what to look for. And say—"

"What?"

"I got quite a bit, Ed, out of studying that report you dictated and she typed up. Spent most of yesterday evening on it after I got home from the Stantons—I was still studying it when the phone call came from the Auslanders. If Monica's not too tired after her first day on a new job, how's about making a report on last night?"

"All right," I said, but without particular enthusiasm. Writing reports, or even dictating them, is a boring occupation, but I knew Uncle Am was right about their value. If you get a report out while it's fresh in your mind you get in little details and things that may turn out later to be important when you restudy the report and find that they fit or clash with other things you've learned meanwhile. They're also wonderful things to have to refer to if, after a case is finished, you have to give evidence.

"Want a second drink?" Uncle Am asked me.

"No, thanks. But getting back to the agenda, we're booked for the evening, after half past six. But how about between now and then? We've got almost three hours. What'll we do with them?"

"Damned if I know, kid. We'll want to see the Stantons again, but three hours wouldn't be much time when you count out how long it would take us to get to Rogers Park and back. And I've had in mind to look up this guy in Evanston that Sally was thinking about marrying, but the same thing's true there. Evanston's even farther. You got any ideas?"

"Have you still got that key to Sally's apartment, Uncle Am?"

"No, but the landlord'll probably give it to me again if I ask him for it. But, Ed, I really went over the place while I was in it."

"How thoroughly," I asked him, "did you check the airshaft angle?"

"Well—there weren't any marks on the sill or in the shaft. I leaned out and studied the walls to look for any scratches or marks to show somebody had climbed up or down the shaft. There weren't any and I think there would have been if the airshaft had been used. It hasn't rained for a long time and the

walls are pretty dirty, especially in a narrow airshaft where there's no wind to dislodge dirt. While I was leaning out the window I found I could make scratches with my thumbnail that would show."

"But there's one way," I said, "Sally might have been killed by means of the airshaft without anybody climbing either up or down it."

"How, Ed?" He stared at me blankly.

"Let's go there now. I'll tell you on the way."

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Chapter 9

I EXPLAINED in the taxi we took outside the bar. I said, “All Sally needed in her condition was a sudden scare—seeing something at the window. It wouldn’t have to be *somebody*, just *something*, something frightening looking. Like—well, a jack-o’-lantern looking in the window for instance.

“Only it wouldn’t have been that, of course. If I’m right that she was killed that way, it might have been something a lot more scary than a jack-o’-lantern. What’s the most scary thing you can think of?”

Uncle Am was nodding. “To Sally, a Martian. An inhuman face or head made out of papier-mache would do it perfectly. Maybe with a light inside it like a jack-o’-lantern has, showing through the eyes or maybe the whole thing semi-transparent so it would all be lighted up. What does a Martian look like, kid? You’ve read science fiction stories.”

“They vary a lot,” I said, “but they run mostly to green. I think they have protuberant eyes, maybe on stalks. And I trunk they usually have antennae, like ants.”

I’d been kidding, of course, just as Uncle Am had been kidding in asking me what a Martian looked like, but I suddenly visualized what I’d just described and I shuddered a little. Because I was suddenly seeing—through Sally Doerr’s eyes—something like that just outside a window that was only a few feet away. And on a night when she expected to be killed by a Martian.

Maybe Uncle Am “was thinking the same thing for he was quiet for a moment. Then he said, “Kid, it could be. It’s the only thing that seems even remotely possible since I proved that nobody had climbed up or down that airshaft. And, since neither of us can see how it could have been done by anything inside the apartment. All right, let’s figure the angles. It’s a four-story build-big; that means there are three apartments that open off that airshaft besides Sally’s.”

“And the roof,” I said. “Don’t forget the roof. That makes four places from which the contraption could have been raised or lowered to Sally’s window. The roof seems a little more likely than one of the other apartments.”

“Why, Ed?”

“Well, with housing what it is, I think we can assume that the other three apartments are occupied. We’ll find that out, of course, when we talk to the landlord, but I think we can assume it meanwhile. Unless it just happened that the killer had one of those apartments, he wouldn’t be able to get one. In any case, the roof would be easier.”

“I think you’ve got something on that, Ed. That whole block is made up of buildings about the same height. None of them over five stories or under four. You could get onto the roof from the roof of any other building in the block.

“Now if I’d wanted to kill Sally that way, I wouldn’t call attention to myself by taking an apartment in the same building—even if I could get one, and even if the one I got opened onto that particular small airshaft. You’re right, the roof is the best bet. And he’d have access to it from anywhere along the block. One thing we can do if we want to be thorough is check every new tenant in those other buildings. Although he wouldn’t necessarily have had to take a room or an apartment in any of them; they’re all flats, rooming houses or apartment buildings. If he found any one of them that gave easy access to the roof, he could use it without living there. Well, here we are.”

The cab was pulling up in front of the building. Uncle Am paid off the driver and we got out.

Before we went inside I crossed to the other side of the street for a bit of perspective on how the roofs were. Uncle Am had been right. Almost all the buildings were four-story ones; there were two five-story ones near one end of the block and one three-story one near the other end. With just a bit of climbing, in case the killer had started from near either corner, he could have reached the roof of the building in which Sally had lived.

We started up the steps and Uncle Am stopped me. “Kid, I just had a thought. Korbytsky, the landlord, is a nice old geezer who likes a drink. He offered me one when I was talking to him yesterday and then found the larder was bare. Let’s take a bottle with us this time, and he’ll loosen up. Not that he wasn’t willing to talk all over the lot yesterday, but a shot may help his memory. There’s a liquor store right oh the corner.”

I said okay, and we started for the liquor store.

Uncle Am said, “We might as well find out If Sally bought her liquor there, too. Forgot to tell you, I got a picture of her from Stanton while I was out in Rogers Park yesterday evening. Thought it might come in handy.”

“Did you learn anything out there?”

“Nothing you hadn’t learned. I talked to everybody, but didn’t get anything. Pumped them about the girls’ early life, and the death of their parents, and got the same story the girls told you. And—hell, kid, that’s what makes this case so tough. Everybody tells exactly the same story about everything. We can’t find a discrepancy.”

“Was Wernecke sober?”

“As a judge. I pumped him on that Martian deal, and he laughed it off, a little shamefacedly. Said he was kidding, naturally, that it was something that—for some reason he couldn’t explain—he was always prone to kid about when he’d been drinking. I feel as you do about him, Ed; I don’t know whether he really believes in them and won’t admit it when he’s sober, or whether it’s just something that seems funny to him when he’s tight. Either way makes him a little goofy, by ordinary standards. But then he isn’t an

ordinary guy.”

We’d reached the liquor store by that time, and went in. Uncle Am bought a pint of good whisky and then showed the proprietor the picture of Sally Doerr and asked him if he’d known her.

The tall man behind the counter peered at the picture through thick glasses. “Don’t know her, personally. But she’s been in here. Think she lives somewhere around here.”

“She did,” Uncle Am said. “She died last week. We’re trying to locate her family. We’ll appreciate anything you can tell us about her.”

The man behind the counter scratched his head. “Not much. I’ve been in business here six months and she’s been in once in a while all the time. Not very often. Once in a while bought beer, once in a while a bottle of whisky and some soda to go with it.”

“Was she always alone?”

“Not always. Say, once I remember, she came in with a girl who was a dead ringer for her. Must have been her sister. I remember how much alike they were, that’s what reminded me. That must have been quite a while ago, several months anyway.”

“Remember anyone else she ever came with?”

“A fellow, a few times.” He was looking at me. “About your build, maybe a little heavier, but he was blond. Had a crew cut and didn’t wear a hat.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Month, two months. I remember she called him Bill. And he paid for whatever they got, times he was with her. If he called her by name, I don’t remember it. What *was* her name?”

There wasn’t any harm in telling it. “Sally Doerr,” I told him. “Was she ever here with anybody else?”

“No, not that I remember of. Guess that’s all I can tell you about her.”

We thanked him and left. On the way back, Uncle Am said, “Didn’t get us much, but it didn’t hurt to try. The Bill is probably William Haberman, the guy in Evanston she was engaged to—or almost engaged to. If the description fits him, we can be sure. I don’t see how there can be anything in that angle, but I guess one of us will be looking him up sooner or later.”

I nodded without answering. For some damn silly reason, I hated to think of a guy named Bill with a blond crew haircut taking Sally and a bottle of liquor to Sally’s room. I wanted to poke him in the nose, and for no reason at all; Sally hadn’t been anything to me, and she was dead now anyway. It was ridiculous for me to dislike him before I ever met him.

We started up the steps again and this time we went on in and along the hall. Uncle Am knocked on a door, and I noticed that the door was in the same relative position—at the back of the hallway—as Sally’s door was. Korbytsky’s apartment must be one of the three others that opened on Sally’s airshaft. That would let us kill two birds with one stone, if we were going to talk to him anyway.

He looked more pleased than surprised when he opened the door and he greeted Uncle Am with enough enthusiasm to show me that they'd got along pretty well on Uncle Am's first call. Korbytsky was small and he must have been nearly seventy, but he was spry and cheerful looking. He was either starting to grow a beard or hadn't shaved for four or five days, but he looked neat and clean otherwise.

He had us inside his place before Uncle Am could get around to introducing me to him; he shook hands with a hand as thin as a bird's claw, but with surprising strength in it. "So this is the young partner you were telling me about, huh? Well, he's better looking than you are."

"That's why I keep him around," Uncle Am said. "For questioning women. He can get more out of one than I and the police force put together."

Korbytsky chuckled. "I see what you mean. I wish I could offer the two of you a drink, but since yesterday when you were here I haven't had a chance to —"

"Hah!" said Uncle Am. "We beat you to it." He pulled the pint out of his pocket and handed it over. "You can't get out of giving us a drink that easily this time. Not if you've got water and ice cubes. And in a pinch we could get by without the ice cubes. Is it a pinch?"

"It's not a pinch. Ice cubes I've got. If you gentlemen will be seated and wait a moment—" He started for the kitchenette that was just like Sally's and identically located.

Uncle Am stopped him. "We're not gentlemen and, if you don't mind, we won't be seated. We want to take a look at your roof and that would be a good thing to do while you make us some drinks, if you don't mind?"

"The roof?"

"The roof. How do you get to it?"

"Trap door over the hallway on the fourth floor. But you need a stepladder to get up to the trap door. The stepladder's in the basement."

"We'll find it," Uncle Am said. "Is the trap door locked?"

"Hooked from the inside, that's all. But the basement's locked. If you really want to get the stepladder and go out on the roof, I'll give you the basement key."

Uncle Am said we really wanted to and got the key.

We found the stepladder and carried it, between us, up four flights of stairs. It was a high stepladder and took some maneuvering around the corners and landings. One person alone might possibly have managed it, but he'd have had a devil of a time.

I unhooked the trap door from the inside, pushed it back and climbed through it. I gave Uncle Am a hand up before I stopped to look things over.

He sat down on the trap door, panting a little after the work with the stepladder plus climbing out through the trap door.

He said, "Hell, kid, he couldn't have come this way by himself. And he couldn't have crossed this roof without leaving marks. Look how fresh this tar

is.”

My feet had been sinking in it a trifle and I saw what he meant all right. I bent down and poked it with my finger and left a tiny dent. The roof had been tarred recently; there wasn't any doubt of that. Long enough ago for a non-sticky surface to have formed on the tar, but underneath the tar was still soft.

I said, “This would have been at night, around midnight. It wouldn't have been that soft then.”

The sun was beating down on us and on the roof. I looked around and located the square opening that would be the top of the airshaft that led down past Sally's bedroom window. I said, “Stay here, Uncle Am. I'm going to walk once around that looking for marks, but let's not both, mark up the roof doing it. I'm going to come back here and try it again at night after the roof's cooled off, and see if it still leaves tracks like this. It doesn't prove anything that it does now.”

I walked once around the airshaft opening, keeping a yard or so away from it. I left tracks in that soft tar that were as obvious as the ones Robinson Crusoe found in the sandy beach of his island, but I didn't see any signs or marks besides the ones I made myself.

I was pretty thoroughly convinced, when I got back to the trap door, that nobody had walked across that tar since it had been put down, but I wouldn't be able to be absolutely sure until I'd tried it at night.

We went down to the first floor again, leaving the ladder leaning against a wall up on the fourth, and I explained to Mr. Korbytsky my idea of wanting to look over the roof again at night, when the tar wouldn't be so soft from the direct sunshine.

“Sure,” he said. “If you'll just put the ladder back in the basement when you're through with it. I'll leave the basement door unlocked. Don't know why I bother keeping it locked anyway. You want the key to Sally Doerr's place?”

I told him we'd like to borrow it again for a while, if he didn't mind.

He had the drinks ready for us, and from the way the level in the pint bottle had gone down, he must have had a big one for himself while we'd been on the roof. Not that we cared about that, because we intended to stay sober and we didn't intend to take away anything that was left of the bottle we'd brought.

“How about mail?” I asked him. “Has any come for Sally since she died?”

“Not up to Saturday,” he said. “I thought about it then and looked in her mailbox. Nothing but a couple ads and a *Time* magazine and a postcard from some girl friend taking a vacation trip out West, card was from Yosemite and was just ‘Having wonderful time’ stuff. And Saturday afternoon I was down near the post office and I turned in a forwarding address card, so any other mail will go to her guardians. That was right, wasn't it?”

“Sure,” I told him. “Mr. Korbytsky, could you tell us who lives in the apartment right over Sally's, and the one under?”

“Well, the top floor, the one over Sally’s is a salesman, George Everett. He travels; he’s away most of the time. He hasn’t been here for over two weeks, ought to be due back pretty soon. He sells heavy machinery of some kind, covers four or five states.”

“Are you sure he was out of town last Thursday night?”

“Sure, I haven’t seen him for over two weeks, like I said. And his rent was due last week, so I’m really sure, because he mailed me a check for it. Check came Friday and it was postmarked from St. Paul.”

I looked at Uncle Am and he nodded and took the ball. He said, “Would it be too—uh, illegal—if we took a look in Mr. Everett’s apartment, Mr. Korbytsky?”

“A look for what?”

“Just to see if there’s any sign that anyone has been in there recently—used the window off the airshaft? You can come with us to be sure we don’t disturb anything, and it won’t take us long.”

“Well, you got me curious. It’s a deal, on one condition. You fellows got to tell me what you’re looking for—on the roof and in that apartment. I know you think maybe Sally didn’t die naturally, but how could anything have been done from the roof or from another apartment? I can tell you one thing; nobody climbed up or down that airshaft. I looked to see. You probably looked too.”

Uncle Am admitted that he had, and then explained my idea that maybe something had been raised from below or lowered from above to the level—of Sally’s window for the purpose of frightening her.

Korbytsky nodded slowly. “Sure enough, could be. And you think somebody maybe got on the roof or else broke into the apartment above while George was away, huh? All right, I’ll go up with you.”

He got a tagged key from a dresser drawer and climbed the stairs with us to the fourth floor. He opened the door with the key, after he’d knocked to be sure that the occupant hadn’t yet returned, and we followed him into the apartment. Like Korbytsky’s own, it was a duplicate of Sally’s except that the furniture was a bit differently arranged.

“Whew,” he said, “hot and stuffy in here. He left all the windows closed.”

Uncle Am and I headed right for the bedroom and the window onto the airshaft. It was closed all right and there was plenty of dust on the sill and on the window ledges, a good two weeks’ accumulation of dust, as there was on other flat surfaces in the room. It was pretty obvious that nobody had opened that window recently, or leaned out over that sill.

“One part of the idea shot to hell, Ed,” Uncle Am said. “It sure wasn’t from here. It had to be the roof or one of the other apartments. Who lives on the second floor, Mr. Korbytsky?”

“Tell you when we get back down to my place. Just as soon not stay here to talk, in case Mr. Everett should come back—he’s about due—and then we’d have to explain and everything.”

We went back downstairs. Korbytsky made himself another drink; Uncle Am and I both refused.

"To you, gentlemen," Korbytsky said.

"The second floor," I reminded him.

He shook his head. "Couldn't be. Postman and his wife, elderly couple. Quiet and respectable, our oldest tenants—lived over me for six years. He's about ready for retirement and then they'll move out to the country. Nope, I can't see them pushing anything up the air-shaft out their window."

"Could they have been away Thursday night?"

"Doubt it. Wouldn't have been out of town, anyway. He took his vacation early this year; they were away in April."

"Out for the evening?"

"Well, that could have been. What time would this have been?"

"Midnight, or a little after."

"Nope, they wouldn't have been out that late, if they were out at all. They get up at six, always in bed by ten, eleven at the latest. They wouldn't have been out at midnight."

"What's their name?"

"Winslow, James Winslow. He works out of the Dearborn branch, right near here. Guess that's why they've lived here for so long, even though the quarters are smallish for a couple. Postman does enough traveling days he isn't crazy about a long trip to and from his route every morning and night. Anyway, that's what he told me once."

"But you don't know for sure that they were home Thursday night?"

"Not for sure, no. Be pretty unusual, though, if they weren't. You might ask Mrs. Winslow; she's probably home."

I glanced at Uncle Am and he said, "I'll do it, Ed." He went out.

"Did the Winslows know Sally?" I asked Korbytsky.

"Just by sight, not by name. Talking to them Sunday, up there for dinner. They invite me up for Sunday dinners about once a month or so. I told 'em Sally Doerr was dead and they didn't place her till I said she was the girl with the red hair who lived on the floor above, and then they remembered seeing her coming in and out. But they didn't even know which apartment she'd lived in."

He took another sip of his drink and looked at me over the edge of the glass. "And if you want to know whether anybody pushed anything up the airshaft out *my* window, they didn't."

I decided to wait till Uncle Am came back downstairs to ask him for any details. Instead I decided to eliminate a possibility, remote as it seemed. I asked him when the roof had been tarred last.

"Two months ago. Began to leak a little and I figured I might as well get a whole new tar job instead of patching around. Cost plenty."

"How long have you owned the building?"

"Dozen years or so. Oh, I don't own it outright, or I could sell it for enough

to retire on. Pretty well mortgaged and the interest and upkeep take most of the rentals. But as long as I live here and take care, of it myself I get free rent and enough to live on. Mrs. Winslow must be home all right; your uncle's been gone a while. Yes, I used to be in real estate, had an interest in a lot of things, lost most of it in the Depression when real estate and rents dropped almost to nothing. But I hung onto a fair equity in this building and now as long as I keep it, it keeps me."

"Would you mind, Mr. Korbytsky, if I borrowed the key to Sally's apartment?"

"Not at all. Want to go up there now?" He got the key from the drawer and gave it to me.

"Haven't much time left this afternoon; we've got a dinner date. But there's one thing I do want to check. Mind if I go in there when I come back late this evening to look for marks on the roof?"

"No, that's all right. I got to clean the apartment tomorrow, just placed an ad for it in the afternoon papers for tomorrow, so I better have it straightened up by noon when people start coming. Tell you what, if I'm not still up when you're through with the key, just push it through the slot of my mailbox. You can tell whether I'm up or not because a crack of light shows under the door."

I pocketed the key and thanked him.

He said, "But you won't find Sally's stuff still there, Mrs. Stanton came and got it yesterday afternoon. I helped her carry it down and get it in her car." He frowned. "Rather a foolish woman, but a nice one. Said that even though her ward's rent was paid to the end of the month, there wasn't any reason why I couldn't go ahead and rent the place again. So I'll be half a month's rent to the good."

"Was Mrs. Stanton alone?"

"Yes. Someone really should have come with her. There was probably more stuff than she realized. Three suitcases of clothes besides a floor lamp, a table lamp, a soft pillow. There were some drapes, too, that Sally had made for the front windows, but she said I could have those."

Uncle Am came back. He said, "They were home Thursday night." He sat down and looked at Korbytsky. "Guess that leaves only your apartment, Mr. Korbytsky. You were home Thursday night around midnight?"

"Home and awake. Even have an alibi. Three friends of mine were here for beer and some penny-ante poker. One of 'em left around twelve but the other two were here till almost one. You know how it is when you get playing poker; time doesn't mean anything. Give you their names if you want to check me on it."

Uncle Am grinned. "Guess we can take your word for it. Well, we've got a dinner date. We'd better push."

We pushed. It wasn't hard to convince Korbytsky that we didn't want to take away what was left of the bottle.

There was time enough to take a streetcar to the Loop, so we walked over

to State Street. I asked Uncle Am why he'd taken so long at the Winslows'.

He said, "No special reason. Talked to the Mrs. a while and just as I was leaving her husband came home and I had to tell him what it was all about. They were home Thursday all evening, went to bed about half past ten."

"Any possibility that—?" I didn't know quite how to finish the question, and let it dangle.

"No possibility of anything, kid. Nobody could have got in because they bolt their door, and they're both light sleepers. And if you've got any idea that *they* pushed anything up the airshaft, all you'd have to do is meet them." He chuckled. "They look like David Harum and Whistler's mother. I can picture them scaring somebody to death with a papier-mache Martian like I can picture Santa Claus as Bluebeard. Nope, kid, I'm afraid all the apartments off the airshaft are wiped out. If anything was lowered to Sally's window it was from the roof."

"You're sure about Korbytsky?"

"Hell, Ed, he might talk somebody to death. But what else?"

I agreed with him; I'd just been making sure that his opinion was the same as mine. Even if he had a motive, I couldn't picture Korbytsky as a killer. And he wouldn't have made up the story about the penny-ante poker and offered to give us the names of his guests if it hadn't been true.

We got to the Blackstone a little early, but Frank Bassett had been even earlier and was waiting for us.

Chapter 10

BASSETT SAID he was starving to death so we went into the dining room right away. As soon as we were at the table, he wanted to know the full story of Dorothy Doerr's drowning.

I told him all the main details, not all the minor points and conversational parts.

He shook his head when I'd finished. "It sounds like a crazy coincidence, Ed. Damned if I see how it could have been anything else. Unless it was deliberate suicide. She couldn't have just decided to hell with it and swum out till she drowned, could she?"

"No, it couldn't have been suicide," I told him. I didn't tell him the circumstances that made me feel sure of that—they couldn't have had anything to do with her death and were none of his business—but I knew damn well that Dorothy wasn't in a suicidal mood at that moment, any more than I myself had been.

Bassett sighed. "Then I still say it's just a coincidence. Sure, I don't like coincidences any better than you do, but damn it they do happen. Like once I bought my brother-in-law a necktie for Christmas and when we swapped presents, damn if he hadn't given me one exactly like it. And we laughed and kidded about it and compared notes and found we'd both bought them at Marshall Field's on the same day."

"This is a double coincidence, though, Frank. Sally thought she was going to die, and she did. Dorothy thought so, and she did. Each within twenty-four hours or less."

"Look, Ed, what about this? What if Sally's dying—that way, after thinking she was going to—unhinged her sister's mind, makes her think she's got a premonition and then makes her carry it out."

"No. Dorothy was sane. Carrying out a premonition was the last thing on her mind just then. Take my word for it, Frank. And the two girls liked each other and got along okay, but they weren't close enough for what happened to Sally to have unhinged Dorothy's mind."

"If you say so, Ed, but *how* could Dorothy have been killed?"

I said, "I've got a vague idea, but I'd rather not talk about it yet. I'm not sure yet that it makes sense."

Uncle Am looked at me in surprise. "Ed, you told me you had an idea on only one of the two girls, but I thought you were talking about how *Sally* might have been killed."

“No, I didn’t mean that, Uncle Am. I thought of that idea of a contraption in the airshaft just before I mentioned it.”

Uncle Am was still staring at me, but Bassett was asking what contraption in the airshaft and I ignored Uncle Am’s curiosity and told Bassett what my idea about that had been and how we’d eliminated all access to the air-shaft except from the top, on the roof.

He shrugged. “Could be, Ed, but it sounds kind of farfetched. But then, to me, so does the idea that either of the girls was murdered. I don’t know why I play along with you guys at all on this. I’d think the whole thing was strictly from marihuana if it wasn’t for that thousand dollar bill. That makes it for damn sure that somebody besides you two thinks there’s something to investigate.”

Uncle Am asked, “Did you check on the serial number of that bill, Frank?”

“Yeah. Found a bank record on it, but it doesn’t get us anywhere. Six months back. Went to the operator of a big gambling casino just outside the county. No use even trying to trace it any farther than that; they wouldn’t tell us the time of day out there for one thing, and they wouldn’t know where any one particular bill went anyway. There’s big-time gambling there and bills like that change hands frequently. It’s probably changed hands dozens of times in the six months since it was in a bank.”

I said, “Wernecke seems to me a more likely bet as a gambler than Stanton.”

Bassett’s pale eyes looked at me. “Since when, Ed, can you tell whether a guy gambles by looking at him? Either one of them could have taken a flyer at a game somewhere and happened to hit heavy enough to cash out for a few bills like that. I haven’t met this Wernecke; what do you mean he looks like a gambler? Does he wear a checked suit and a diamond tie-pin? Or just an eyeshade?”

I said, “I just meant that Stanton strikes me as conservative, and Wernecke doesn’t. But okay, you’re right, you can’t judge by looks whether a man takes a flyer once in a while or not. Did you find out how much Wernecke’s income is, Frank?”

“Nothing startling. But not bad, under his circumstances. He gets a four hundred and thirty-five dollar royalty check once a month, and he writes the Stantons a check for a hundred for room and board. That leaves him about eighty bucks a week to drink on and play around with. Not bad for a single man.”

“Especially,” I said, “one who isn’t interested in sex, and he told me he wasn’t. But it wouldn’t be eighty bucks, Frank. Don’t forget the nasty little item of income tax. That’d take a pretty big bite. Not that he still wouldn’t have enough to stay drunk on. What would you guess Stanton’s income is as a buyer at that department store?”

“Five thousand to seven thousand. Department stores don’t pay fancy salaries. That’s as much as or more than Wernecke gets, but of course

Stanton's supporting a wife and kid, so the circumstances are different. They were even more different before; he was supporting Dorothy, too, and sending her through college. I'll admit I can't see Stanton's having enough left over to do any gambling to speak of."

"So you think Wernecke's our client?"

Bassett nodded. "He's more likely to have a stray grand, yes. Also more likely to have used the screwball approach of telling you he's a Martian. My guess is he suspects his brother-in-law and hopes your investigation leads to him, but he wouldn't want—in that case—to finance it openly. Sure, he could have come to you in the open and asked you to keep quiet about it, but maybe he didn't trust you that far."

I said, "The same thing could be said about Stanton, if he suspects Wernecke."

"You pay your money and you take your choice, Ed. Except that Wernecke is more likely from the financial angle. Well, I'm afraid that's about all I can take time to do for you. Unless you can come up with some proof that Sally Doerr was killed, so I can work on it officially."

"Thanks a hell of a lot, Frank," Uncle Am said, "for doing as much as you have."

"That's all right. Those were all things I could get easier than you could have. Oh, and one other thing. I talked to McClain to find out exactly what Sally had told him when she came to the department to say she was afraid of being murdered by Martians. I thought she might have told him—before he shut her up—just what gave her that idea."

"Did she?" I asked. I was really interested in that. During my afternoon and evening with Sally I'd deliberately kept her off the subject of Martians—and had been sorry about it ever since. However crazy the idea, it might help to know where she got it.

"She did," Bassett said. "They called her up on the telephone and told her they were going to kill her."

I felt suddenly excited. *That fitted.* That explained her feeling so sure that an attempt was going to be made, and when. More important, it was a build-up that would get her ready to be killed by even a minor fright.

No, it didn't explain how she got that fright, but it was the logical preparation for it.

And it fitted something else, too. It fitted that phone call which had wakened me in Sally's living room at two o'clock in the morning, an hour or two after she had died. Whoever had called to warn her of death had made that call to see if his plan had succeeded. He couldn't have known, one way or the other, when a man's voice had answered the phone instead of Sally's voice, but he'd hung up without taking a chance on speaking.

If I'd had any doubts left that Sally Doerr had been murdered, what Bassett had just told me dissolved them. I still hadn't the slightest idea *how*—unless I could still, prove my idea of something lowered down the airshaft—but I was

sure now that Sally had been murdered. And if Sally's death had been murder, then so had Dorothy's. And in that case, although I couldn't prove it, I *did* know how.

I asked Bassett, "Was there more than one phone call from this 'Martian' or did Sally mention that?"

"McClain didn't ask her. He didn't ask her any details."

Well, I hadn't asked any either, so I couldn't blame McClain for that.

After dinner Bassett said he'd better push along. He said, "I'll admit that Dorothy's dying too makes it look pretty funny, but I still can't see anything in it. Not that that matters to you guys. With a retainer like that to work on, you'd be working on it anyway. Or would you be working on it anyway?"

I said, "I guess I would, some. Not full time, probably; we couldn't afford it."

"Well, let me know if you get your teeth into anything; then maybe I can get it marked murder and do something on it. But until then, I'm stymied."

We talked him into having one after-dinner drink and while we were waiting for it, Uncle Am said, "Ed, if you're going to see Monica tonight, maybe you'd better get her on the phone. I've got her number and address." He took out his notebook and gave them to me.

I went to a phone booth and called the number. Monica's voice said, "Monica Wright speaking." I like people who answer a phone that way instead of saying "Hello," which doesn't mean anything.

"Ed Hunter, Monica," I said. "Are you busy this evening?"

"Well, not exactly. I—"

"It's business," I said. "If you've got the time, I'd like to dictate another report to you. If it would keep you up too late to type it tonight, you can do the typing tomorrow. And we can talk over what you're doing at the Insurance company. All right?"

"All right. All I was going to do was to wash my hair and give myself a permanent. I guess that can wait."

"Swell. Do you want to come up to the office and bring your notebook, or shall I come there?"

She hesitated just a moment and then said it would be all right for me to come there, and I promised to make it within an hour.

When I got back to the table our drinks were there. Bassett had ordered his straight; he drank it rather quickly and left.

Uncle Am said, "Well, kid, you set with the stenographer?"

I nodded. "Want to come along?"

"No use both of us going. I want to study that report after it's typed, but there's no use in my listening to its being dictated. I'll try to figure out some angle to work on. And maybe I'll drop in at the office awhile."

"What for?"

"Well, I can think better there. Besides, neither of us has been in there at all today. Might be some mail. You still intend to go around to Sally's place to

look at the roof again?"

I nodded. "And to take another look at her apartment," I said, "even if her stuff is out of it. Don't ask me what I'm going to be looking for. I don't know."

And I didn't know, unless it was the ghost of Sally Doerr. Maybe it was just that. I said, "I think, Uncle Am, I'm going to spend the night there,"

He looked at me strangely. "Kid, maybe you know what you're doing, but damned if I do. Well, in the frame of mind you're in, I suppose anything is better than doing nothing. Unless—how's about meeting me later and we can hang one on."

"I don't think I want to."

"How's about my meeting you at Sally's apartment later?"

I shook my head definitely.

He said, "Okay, kid, I'll peddle my papers. But have you got any suggestions for anything I can do?"

I thought for a minute. "If you have time you could find out when Dorothy's funeral is and send some flowers. I don't think I want to go to the funeral, but we can at least do that much. She was a swell kid, Uncle Am.

When I think that I let her get killed—"

"Stop that, Ed. Sure, I'll have some flowers sent. And we're going to have to figure out something to do for the Auslanders to pay them back, a little, for what they did for you. And the sky's the limit on that, if I can think of something. Ill try to. Got any ideas?"

I shook my head again. My brain still wasn't working. Uncle Am said, "Say, kid, I noticed that that canoe they got is pretty patched and battered. How's about having a good new one shipped out to them?"

"By me, you can send them the *Queen Elizabeth*."

"Good idea, Ed, but I don't think they can get it through the locks in the St. Lawrence River. So let's stick to a canoe. Want another drink?"

"No, thanks."

"Okay, kid." He stood up. "I'll take care of that flowers business and then I'll drop in at the office. Maybe by then I'll have figured something I can do. If not, I'm going to turn in early. I didn't get any sleep to speak of last night; that phone call came just as I was turning in. I maybe dozed a little between five and seven, sitting up watching you."

I'd forgotten that he hadn't had any real sleep. I said, "Okay, I'll see you at home in the morning. Even if I sleep at Sally's I'll have to drop home afterwards to shave and clean up."

We separated outside the Blackstone. It was still only half past seven and there wasn't any hurry so I walked over to State Street and took a streetcar. Even with a big retainer we couldn't go on taking taxicabs forever when there wasn't any need for them. Monica's apartment was the other way out from town, but it was so like Sally's that I could almost imagine, as Monica let me in, that this was last Thursday evening and that it was really Sally's place. The

arrangement of two rooms, the kitchenette, was almost identical.

But Monica wasn't Sally. She wasn't psychopathic. She didn't have Martians after her in her mind.

She said, "Sit down, Mr. Hunter. Ill get my notebook. Or do you want me to tell you about the insurance office first?"

"Did you learn anything interesting there?"

"No, I'm afraid I didn't. I'm afraid there isn't going to be anything there to learn. I mean, anything that would concern—what you're working on."

"Then we might as well get the dictation over with."

"All right, Mr. Hunter. You take that easy chair; I'll sit at the table so I can write."

I said, "We got as far as your calling me Ed. Remember?"

She laughed a little. I sat down in the overstuffed chair. It was upholstered in a different color from Sally's chair but it was in the same position, facing the same way.

Her pencil poised over the notebook, but I didn't know where to start. Or how to start. I didn't want to have to tell her what had happened last night. I don't mean I didn't want to tell Monica Wright, especially—she meant nothing to me—I just didn't want to have to live through last night again, ever, for anyone. Sure, I'd told Uncle Am; I'd told the main parts to Bassett. But I didn't want to tell it again now.

I said, "Monica, you don't have a premonition, do you?"

"A premonition?"

"That something might happen to you tonight?"

She misunderstood at first; color and anger came into her face. Then, looking at me, she must have seen that I hadn't meant it that way at all.

"What do you mean, Ed? You look as though—as though something terrible happened."

I started to tell her. I noticed that she wasn't writing and told her to, then started over again. It was easier that way, answering a question, not just dictating. But I made it a detailed answer, everything but the parts that were purely personal.

Finally I said, "That's all," and she closed the notebook.

"That—that *must* have been terrible," she said.

I grinned, not very convincingly. I said, "You see what I mean. If you ever get a premonition anything's going to happen to you, I'm not the guy you want around?"

"But, whatever happened, it wasn't your fault. You shouldn't blame yourself."

Everybody had told me that, everybody but me.

I said, "Let's skip it. How goes the job?"

"All right. But I'm afraid I haven't learned much."

"You couldn't expect to, in one day. Tell me just what your work is."

She told me, and it was exactly what the woman whom I talked to there

had told me. There didn't seem to be any angle.

"Had Sally ever talked about Martians to anyone there?"

"Well—I haven't worked around to Martians yet. I'm posing as an acquaintance of Sally's, but I think I'd better not ask too many questions all at once. I've found one of the girls—her name is Charlotte Andrews—who was Sally's closest friend there. Maybe she was Sally's closest girl friend. She hadn't know about Sally's dying, either, until after you'd been around at the company. She was crying about it when I got there yesterday to apply for the job."

"Did you talk to her then?"

"No, not then. But after I reported for work this morning I got acquainted with her first; I went to the washroom the first time she did. And when I told her I'd known Sally slightly, she opened up and wanted to know how Sally had died."

"She did? You mean she suspected something?"

"Oh, no. She knew Sally had a weak heart, and she assumed it was that. She just wanted the details, and she was especially sorry she hadn't known in time to go to the funeral or even send flowers."

"How much did you tell her?"

"Just that Sally had died last Thursday, some time in the night, of heart trouble. I said I hadn't been at the funeral either, but that Sally was only an acquaintance of mine, not a friend. I didn't want to lay it on too thick. We didn't do all this talking in the washroom, of course; we went to lunch together."

"Good girl," I said. "You're working fast." I thought a minute. "I'd rather like to meet this Charlotte Andrews myself. Do you have her phone number or address?"

"I can get them tomorrow. But—do you want to go to her openly, as a detective, or would you rather just meet her? I think I can fix it, make a double date."

"That might be better. But you'd better introduce me as a friend of Sally's, too, so it will be natural for me to talk about her and to get Charlotte talking about her. Say, here's the best angle. If the double date business works out, I mean. Tell her—before the date—that I'm a student of psychology. Maybe even that I'm studying to be a psychiatrist. Is Charlotte very intelligent or well educated?"

"No."

"Then I can get by with it. She knows—or realizes—that Sally was psychopathic?"

"Oh yes. 'A little goofy' was the way she put it. As I said, I didn't want to push too hard all at once, so I didn't ask in what way. Shall I fix a double date for tomorrow night, if I can? If Charlotte's free then?"

"If you can," I said. "But it's pretty short notice, isn't it?"

"I doubt if she has other plans. She's a little on the dumb side and not very

pretty. I don't think she has too many dates. That's probably why she and Sally were friends. Have you ever noticed, Ed, that a pretty girl's best girl friend generally isn't attractive, and vice versa? I think it's not conscious or deliberate, usually, but a pretty girl likes an unattractive one as a foil—and the unattractive one gets dates because she's *a* friend of the pretty one."

I grinned. "You and Charlotte ought to get along then. And here you are getting her a date right away. Uh—can you dig up someone, or shall I? For Charlotte, I mean?"

"Don't be silly. Your date is with Charlotte, so you can talk to her about Sally. And you won't have to dig up a friend of yours for me, thanks. I have friends. As a matter of fact, I already have a date for tomorrow night, thank you."

I laughed and found that I was feeling better, a lot better. I even liked Monica Wright better than I had. We'd rubbed one another the wrong way, somehow, up to now.

I told her I'd phone her tomorrow night at six to find out whether the double date was on or not. From what she'd told me about Charlotte I didn't particularly look forward to meeting her, but if she'd been Sally's closest friend, it might be worth an evening.

It wasn't ten o'clock yet and I offered to take Monica down somewhere for a drink, but she reminded me that she still had the report to type and that she had to get up early to go to work, so I left instead.

I remembered to stop in a drugstore downstairs to buy a flashlight and then I headed for Sally's place.

I climbed to the fourth floor and the stepladder was still where we'd left it, so I set it up under the trap door and let myself out onto the roof.

There was bright moonlight. It was warm and muggy, as it had been Thursday night, not a breath of breeze. I sat down and took off my shoes and then walked across the roof to the opening of the airshaft that led down past Sally's window.

The tar roof was faintly soft and resilient under my feet. I bent down and examined it very closely and carefully with the flashlight. Yes, I was leaving marks, even in my stocking feet. Very faint marks, but I could see them and they were beyond doubt. The tar was quite thick, but only the thin top layer of it had really hardened. Footsteps dented it slightly.

Walking bent almost double, I went to and around the opening of the airshaft. The only marks even near it were the ones I'd made myself that afternoon and the ones I was making now.

Sally's death had not come down the airshaft from the roof.

I swore to myself. That idea of a contraption in the airshaft had been a good one. Now it was gone, gone completely unless I decided that Sally had been killed by an elderly postman, about to retire, and his wife, both of whom Uncle Am liked—or by the talkative and likable Polish landlord, three times Sally's age and with no more motive for killing her than I had, and with a

penny-ante poker game for an alibi to boot.

I climbed back down the stepladder after I'd latched the trap door from the inside. It was a tough job managing that long stepladder down the stairs alone but I managed it. At least as far as the first floor; Korbytsky heard me there. He came out and gave me a hand in taking it down the last flight into the basement.

He insisted that I come In and talk, at least a few minutes, and have at least one drink out of the liquor Uncle Am and I had left there that afternoon.

I didn't want either the conversation or the liquor, particularly, but it was easier to say yes than to argue. I went in.

He made drinks; I insisted in mine being a weak one. "Did you know a girl friend of Sally's by the name of Charlotte Andrews, Mr. Korbytsky?" I asked him.

"Not by name. I'm afraid I didn't know any of Sally's friends by name. What did she look like?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I haven't met her yet."

"Well, I've seen Sally go in and out with several people, from time to time. One blond young man with a crew haircut was here fairly often."

"Did he ever stay all—Wait a minute, I really haven't any business asking that, Mr. Korbytsky."

"Why not? The only thing is, I couldn't answer it. I don't make my tenants punch a time clock and what they do is their business—as long as they're not noisy about it. If he ever stayed for breakfast I never happened to see him leaving. But then again I generally sleep fairly late. Seldom get to bed before twelve or one and seldom get up before nine or ten. At my age, Ed, you need nine hours' sleep and sometimes I sleep ten. But getting back to Sally's girl friends, the one I've seen with her the most often—and that'd be eight or ten times, maybe—had buck teeth. If this—what's her name?"

"Charlotte Andrews."

"If you find out Charlotte Andrews has buck teeth, then she's the one I've seen most often."

I grinned. "I hope she's not the one, then. I got a date with her tomorrow night, maybe. Listen, Mr. Korbytsky, you don't mind if I spend all night in Sally's apartment tonight?"

"Don't see why I should, as long as you don't mess up anything. Only there aren't any sheets on the bed. I took 'em off today; tomorrow I'll clean and fix up the place before prospects from the ad in the paper come around to look at it. Well, it's a hot enough night; I guess you won't need any covers."

"Okay, thanks. And I'll drop the key in your mailbox when I leave in the morning. Well, guess I'll be going up."

I put down my empty glass and stood.

"Wish you'd stay and talk awhile, but all right. Listen, Ed, tell me one thing. You really think Sally Doerr was murdered, or you wouldn't be doing all this. But *why*? How could she have been, and what makes you think she

was?”

“I wish I knew, Mr. Korbytsky,” I said. “Honest to God, I wish I knew. I haven’t the faintest idea.”

I went upstairs and let myself into Sally’s apartment.

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Chapter 11

I TURNED on all the lights and prowled the place for a while. I don't know what I was looking for. I didn't find it.

Something was missing besides the sofa pillows and the two lamps. For a while I couldn't figure out what it was; I sat down in the easy chair and closed my eyes to visualize the room as it had been and then opened them again, and discovered that the other missing object was a picture that had hung on the opposite wall. It had been an original oil landscape, rather poorly done. Possibly Sally had been interested in painting once and had done it herself. Korbytsky hadn't mentioned a picture, but it probably didn't matter. There wasn't any way I could see that the picture could have been connected with her death.

I got up and began to pace around again. I went to the airshaft and flashed my flashlight up and down it. I don't know what I expected to find. I didn't find anything.

The airshaft was out; it had to be out. It hadn't been used from the roof or from the apartment above. Old Korbytsky was unthinkable as a murderer and I was willing to take Uncle Am's word that the postman and his wife were equally harmless.

The airshaft had seemed like a possibility, but I had to make myself forget about it so I could try to think of another possibility somewhere.

Only I couldn't think of one.

I looked at the bed. The sheets were gone from it and the pillowcases were gone from the two pillows. But I put the pillows together against the head of the bed, as Sally had had them. I lay down as Sally had been lying and stared up at the ceiling, but there wasn't anything to see up there.

I tried to think of some way, *any* way, in which Sally, lying like this, could have been given a sudden fright to stop her heart. Some way that was noiseless, because, in the next room, I'd have heard a sound if there'd been one.

I began to wonder if I could be wrong and Frank Bassett right, *it* Sally's dying of heart failure that night could have been simple coincidence after all.

But someone had agreed with me, a thousand dollars' worth.

Stanton or Wernecke?

I pulled my mind away from that because it didn't matter, until and unless I knew *how* Sally could have been killed.

There wasn't any way.

I got up from the bed and went out into the living room. I left the bedroom light on and the door ajar about as far ajar as it had been Thursday night.

I sat down in the chair to think. And because it was hot and stuffy and because sooner or later I might fall asleep, I got up again and took off my coat and tie and my shoes.

This time I turned off the light and sat down again I tried to put myself back into Thursday night, to imagine that Sally was in that bedroom lying—although I hadn't known it then—naked on the bed and that I was here sitting just as I was sitting now.

Little things came back to me. The sounds Sally had made moving around the bedroom while she'd been undressing. The creak of the bed springs when she lay down upon the bed. No, first there'd been the click of the lamp switch as she'd pulled the cord to turn it on, then another click that would have been the turning off of the overhead light. And then the creak of the springs.

That had been the last sound I'd heard, but I'd stayed awake at least half an hour, maybe longer, after that. And in that utter silence Sally had died.

I felt that I was batting my head up against a brick wall.

Her arm had been up over the head of the bed.. Had she been reaching back to turn off the lamp, to go to sleep? I didn't think so. She'd probably have put away the book and rearranged the pillows before she'd turn out the lamp.

The book, *Life on Other Worlds*.

Could there have been anything about the book? It had been an ordinary twenty-five-cent pocket book. I'd looked at the title and that was all. There'd been a few other pocket books and magazines lying around. Possibly Mrs. Stanton hadn't taken them away. At any rate, she hadn't taken the magazines; I remembered now that an overflowing wastebasket full of things that Mrs. Stanton hadn't taken with her stood beside the step-on garbage can in the kitchenette.

I put on the light and looked through the wastebasket. *Life on Other Worlds* was there, along with the magazines and the other pocket books.

I took it back to the chair and examined it thoroughly. I didn't find anything unusual about it. I skimmed through it to see if there was anything in the contents that might have a bearing.

There wasn't, that I could see. It wasn't a sensationally written book. I saw now, from the title page, that the author was the astronomer royal of England. It was a conservative examination of the possibility of life existing on other planets, and H. Spencer Jones didn't stick his neck out to claim more than the possibility. I didn't take time to read all of any part of it, but I spent maybe an hour skimming around and got interested enough that I decided I wanted to read the whole thing—but not then and there. I put it in my pocket.

I tried to go back to thinking how Sally could have died—other than naturally.

I turned out the light again and closed my eyes. I tried to concentrate.

It was very quiet, so quiet that I could have heard a cockroach scurrying

across the floor had there been a cockroach around to scurry.

Suddenly, in the utter stillness, the telephone rang, right beside me. I literally jumped out of the chair. I was standing up, staring at the telephone.

It had nearly scared the pants off me. I let it ring a second time before I felt confident that I could make my voice sound natural when I answered it.

And then, as I picked up the phone from its cradle, I thought—why not imitate Sally's voice, as nearly as I could? I might get by with it, as far as a "Hello." If somebody was phoning Sally, maybe that somebody didn't know she was dead; he *couldn't* know that she was dead. If I could make two syllables sound feminine, then the caller would have to carry the ball by telling me who he was.

Maybe, I thought, this is whoever called at two o'clock last Thursday night. Maybe he won't hang up this time if he hears a female voice. At least I could try—

I tried.

Over the phone came Uncle Am's chuckle. He said, "Not too good, kid, but not too bad either. It sounded like a cross between Lily Pons and Charlie McCarthy, but it might have fooled a Martian. How go things? I didn't know whether the phone had been disconnected or not but it didn't hurt to try."

"It hurt *me*," I said. "You scared me out of a year's growth."

"You've grown enough so don't let it worry you. How go things?"

"Lousy," I said. "The roof is out, and that kills the whole idea of the airshaft."

"Well, it was a good idea while it lasted, Ed. I just called to tell you, we got another call from our client. I'm still at the office. I was sitting here when the phone rang; I thought it was probably you calling because you were the only one who knew I was coming here."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing very startling. He said he'd learned of the murder of Dorothy Doerr and that he—"

"Wait a minute," I said. "Did he word it that way—'the murder of?'"

"Yes. And he said he didn't blame us for it but he hoped it would cause us to redouble our efforts. And then he hung up, before I could ask him a single damn question."

"It was the same voice?"

"Yes. And I still don't know if it was Wernecke or Stanton. I phoned right back, naturally. I mean, I phoned Stanton's number. Stanton answered, but his voice sounded natural; it wasn't that high-pitched stilted voice our client used—but it still could have been Stanton, as far as I'm concerned."

"What did you ask him?"

"I changed my voice, a little, and played drunk. I asked for Wernecke—he's probably got drunken friends that might call him at any hour, in their cups. Stanton said Wernecke was out. So that leaves us where we were; it still could have been either;"

I thought a second and then said, "If Stanton's at Rogers Park, I'd bet on it being Wernecke, Uncle Am. Whoever called must have known you were at the office. If Wernecke's out, "he could be downtown and have seen a lighted window from the alley."

"Could be, Ed. But he wouldn't have had to know I was here—he didn't have anything to lose trying. It could still have been Stanton, calling from his home. Neither of us was at the office all day; he could have been trying off and on all day and evening on the chance one of us would drop in here eventually. We don't know how many times this phone has rung this afternoon and evening with nobody to answer it."

I said, "Maybe we should quit playing 'Client, client, who is the client?' and try to think about something else. Incidentally, I dictated a report to Monica; she'll type it before she goes to bed tonight and said she'd come to our office on the way to work tomorrow morning and push it through the mail slot if neither of us was there yet."

"Fine. Did you talk to her about Sally?"

I told him about Monica's plan to date me with Sally's closest friend from the office, and he said that was fine too.

"You're still planning to stay there at Sally's tonight, Ed?" he asked.

"Unless you've got a better suggestion. I'm getting nowhere. I'm going crazy trying to figure out even the remotest possibility of how Sally could have been killed. Have you any idea at all?"

"Not a glimmer, Ed. But the way you keep concentrating on Sally—and something you said this afternoon—sounds like you *have* got an idea about Dorothy, and to me that's the tougher of the two. How's about giving with it?"

I said, "No, Uncle Am. Not till I find out about Sally, too. The method used on Dorothy wouldn't have worked on Sally. And I'm not going to stick my neck out—especially on what could be a wild theory—until I know how *both* girls could have been killed. I can be wrong about Dorothy, until I know about Sally. In fact, if Sally wasn't murdered, then I probably *am* wrong about Dorothy."

"All right, kid." Uncle Am sounded annoyed. "But if you can be mysterious, I can too. I've got an idea that I'm going to follow out. I'm going to put in a long distance phone call on it right now." His voice changed tone. "You know, kid, maybe it isn't too bad an idea at that if we don't compare hunches and maybe foul one another up. You stick to your idea of finding out *how* the girls could have been killed, and I'll take another angle and let you worry about that one. And if either of us is on a blind alley, he won't prejudice the other "

It sounded sensible to me and I said so. I wondered what he had in mind, but I could wait to find out. He'd implied that it didn't have anything to do with the *how* of the murders, and that was all I was worried about until I'd got that far.

"Okay, then. Might call you back." The phone clicked in my ear.

I paced the apartment again, wishing I knew what I was looking for. Trying to think logically and not emotionally. The answer had to be there, I told myself. If it wasn't there now, it was in something that had been taken away.

God help me, I went over the place again, inch by inch, looking for trap doors.

I was driving myself nutty, and it was a relief when the phone rang again.

Uncle Am sounded excited. "Ed, I think I got something."

"What?"

"I'm not sure what. Maybe it's a wild idea—like maybe yours about Dorothy is. I'm going to take a little trip out of town. When I get back I'll know and I'll tell you."

"Going to Colorado? To Seco, or to this property the girls owned near it?"

"Neither. Nor yet to Mars. You stick here and work on those *hows*, Ed; that's your department. I'll be back in a day or two. Keep your nose clean."

"But, Uncle Am—"

"So long, Ed."

The phone clicked again. I stared at it, and almost decided to call him back and see if I could get him before he left the office. Then I decided not to. He was right. The best thing I could do was stick to the angle I was working on and not even try to figure out where he was going or why.

Maybe my subconscious could do better. Maybe I'd been concentrating too hard. I turned out the living room light again—the light from the bedroom was plenty to see by—and sat down to see if my subconscious would help me.

It didn't. It wouldn't even stay on the track. I found myself thinking about Dorothy and last night instead of Sally and Thursday night.

Every time I made my mind a blank and waited, Dorothy came. Dorothy saying "After our swim, Ed. In a few minutes ..." And yes, that was part of it, but it wasn't what I wanted to think about. It was what I wanted to forget.

But she wouldn't go away, so I let myself think about Dorothy and see her as she had looked walking ahead of me down to and into the water, the water that had killed her.

I thought; I'm too emotionally tangled in this. That's why I can't think straight.

Not that I'd been in love with either of the girls—whatever love is—but I'd been too close to their deaths. And I felt too responsible. Especially about Sally. If only I'd taken her seriously, listened to her, asked her questions about her Martians—then, although I probably wouldn't have averted what had happened, I might have something to work on now.

I knew—or thought I knew—how Dorothy's death had been accomplished, but I could never prove it. Sally's death would have to be the key. What had happened to Sally?

Something I'd read somewhere, sometime, came to me: "*Death has so many doors to let out life.*"

Through which of those many doors had Sally's life fled?

I couldn't answer. Finally, exhausted, I fell asleep.

When I woke it was getting light outside and the doorway to the bedroom was a sickly yellow.

I felt more tired than when I'd gone to sleep, and I didn't have any answers. Sometimes when you go to sleep concentrating about something, your subconscious keeps thinking about it and you wake up with an answer. I hadn't.

I turned out the bedroom light. I put back on what clothes I'd taken off, and left. On the way out I dropped the key to the apartment through the slot in Korbytsky's mailbox.

It hit the tin bottom with a final sound. I knew I'd never want to use it again, even if the apartment wasn't rented today. With all the time I'd spent in that apartment, with everything I'd done and tried to do, I knew it was useless ever to go back. If the answer was there I wasn't smart enough to find it.

And if it wasn't there, I didn't know where it was. I felt lousy. My muscles were stiff from sleeping in a chair and sore from the exertion, the night before, of swimming myself into unconsciousness. My mind felt fuzzy, useless, hopeless. And, even at this time, half past six in the morning, the streets were warm and breathless; it was going to be a hotter day than any we'd had yet in the heat wave that had lasted over a week now.

I wondered why anybody ever lived in, or even came to, a city like Chicago. I hated it. I hated everything, especially myself.

I walked home, just out of cussedness.

I hoped that Uncle Am had decided not to go wherever he'd been going, or that it had been a short trip and he'd be back already. But he wasn't there when I got to our room. The bed hadn't been slept in. He hadn't taken a suit case but his brief case was gone and his shaving gear wasn't in the bathroom.

I suppose I should have tried to sleep a little more; there wasn't any reason why I had to be at the office at any special time. I'd have to go there sometime during the day to pick up the report Monica was dropping through the slot and put it in the safe instead of leaving it for the scrub woman to find. That was about as important a thing as I could think of to do all day, except—oh, yes, sometime today I was going out to Evanston to look up William Haberman, who had almost married Sally. Not that I expected to get anything important from him, but it would be something to do..

So I bathed and shaved and changed clothes and by then it was eight o'clock. I had some breakfast and got to the office at nine.

Monica had already been there; the report, sealed in a plain envelope, had been pushed through the mail slot.

I was hanging up my hat when the phone rang. I thought that it might be Uncle Am, but it wasn't.

It was a finance company, one we'd done a few jobs for before, to give me the name and what other information they had about a man who'd skipped town owing a balance on his furniture. They'd sold the furniture but it hadn't

covered the indebtedness so they had a deficiency judgment against the man and wanted him found.

I told them okay if they weren't in any hurry, and they weren't.

I looked at the notes I'd taken and saw that the guy's name was Charles Burt and that for reference he'd given his brother-in-law, who was an assistant teller in a bank on Halsted Street. I phoned the bank and asked for the brother-in-law. He came on the wire and said, "This is William Raines speaking." I didn't make my voice tough; I made it very smooth and quiet. I said, "This is John Smith. I want Charlie's address."

"You mean my brother-in-law? I don't know where he is, Mr. Smith."

I said, "Fine. I'll send a couple of the boys out some evening to see you. I won't mention which evening. We wouldn't want coppers around."

He said, "Huh?" and sounded properly scared and excited. "Who is this?"

I said, "John Smith will do. It's simple, Raines. I run a book. The horses. Charlie phoned in bets. He owes me half a yard—fifty bucks. If you don't know where he is, we'll collect from you." He said, "Now listen, Mr. Smith —"

I said, "Never mind. You can tell it to the boys when they—"

"Wait, I'll tell you where he is. I'm not going to get in trouble on *his* account." He gave me an address and sounded plenty relieved when I thanked him for it.

I hung up and toyed with the idea of waiting till tomorrow to phone the finance company back, so we could charge them for a full day, and then I decided it might make a better impression and be worth it in the long run if I called them back right away.

So I called them and gave them the address and felt pretty good at their pleased amazement in getting it so quickly. I entered a charge for half a day's time, the minimum charge. It was seven minutes after nine, and I amused myself—and prolonged my period of feeling good—by figuring out, on the blotter, how much money we'd make a year if each of us could earn half a day's time every seven minutes, eight hours a day, five days a week. It made a rather improbable-looking figure, but then it really was improbable so why shouldn't it look that way?

I didn't earn any money at all in the next seven minutes. I opened Monica's envelope and looked over the report. It was a beautiful job of typing, as neat and perfect as Monica herself.

I read through it and didn't find a mistake. If Monica did that well at the insurance company, they'd sure spot her as a ringer for taking the job at such a low salary. But I had a hunch she was smart enough to think of that herself.

I opened the safe and took out the other report, the one covering Thursday, and read that one too, thinking maybe it might give me an idea. It didn't.

I put both reports back in the safe, along with the envelope that (I looked to make sure) still contained the thousand dollar bill. It didn't look as good as it had last time I'd looked at it; I was beginning to be afraid that we weren't

going to earn it. And even if we ever did, I'd wish that it wasn't there, that the whole thing had never happened.

I wondered if Dorothy's funeral would be today, or tomorrow. I wondered if I wanted to go, or if I should go, and decided that I'd better not. I was too deeply in this thing emotionally as it was. And, much as I wanted to talk to the Stantons again—even though I didn't know anything new to ask them—it was only decent that I stay away from them until after the funeral.

I got our Evanston phone directory and looked under automobiles used. There wasn't any listing under Haberman but I looked among the box ads and found a Jesse L. Haberman given as the proprietor of the Argonne Car Lot—Better Cars for Less—on Howell Boulevard.

I called the number and asked for William Haberman.

"Speaking," said a voice I didn't particularly like.

I gave him my name. "I'd like to talk to you about a personal matter," I said. "Wanted to be sure you'd be there if I came out to Evanston."

"Sure," he said. "I work here. I'll be here all day. If you get here between twelve and one, I'll be eating, but that's next door."

I thanked him and hung up before he could ask what the personal matter was; I didn't want him to have time to think about it while I was on my way out there.

Chapter 12

THE ARGONNE Used Car Lot—Better Cars for Less—had about two dozen cars on it, ranging all the way from a Model A that must have been nearly as old as I to a shiny new Buick that looked like it had just rolled off the assembly line and couldn't have more than a few hundred miles on it.

I got sidetracked looking at the Buick and William Haberman came out of the small frame office in one corner of the lot and walked over to me. I recognized him from the description—about my height but a little heavier, blond hair in a crew cut.

"Nice buggy," he said. "Practically new. Want to try it?"

I shook my head. "I'm Ed Hunter," I told him. "Just talked to you on the phone. I'd like to ask you some questions about Sally Doerr."

His face froze up. "Sorry." But he didn't sound sorry. "I don't care to discuss it."

I felt my fists clench, but I wasn't going to get any information that way. I kept my voice level and tried to bluff. "If you'd rather the inquiries came through the police, I can arrange it that way."

His face got even colder. "On your way. Scram."

I was swinging before I even knew it. But I must have telegraphed the swing because he stepped well back. And before I could step in his face changed a little; an almost pleased look came in it. "Hold everything," he said. "If you want trouble, let's do this right."

I wanted trouble all right. I hated his guts—even if I didn't know exactly why, and this was the perfect opportunity to work off some of the damned frustration I'd been feeling for a day and a half now.

"Swell," I said. "Where do you want to go?"

He took a few steps toward the frame office and called out, out, "Dad. I'm leaving a little early. I'll be home."

To me he said, "Come on," and I follows him out of the lot and toward the kitchen door of the house that stood next to the lot. When I saw where he was heading I said, "Hey, what's the idea? We can't—"

"Sure we can. I got a kind of gym in the basement. Come on.

He held the kitchen door open and I went in first. A nice-looking, little gray-haired woman in a gingham apron was bending over the oven and there was the smell of fresh biscuits. She looked up smiling as Haberman behind me, said, "Mom, this is Ed Hunter. We're going down in the basement to have a little fun."

Beginning to feel a little foolish, I told her that I was glad to meet her.

She put out a warm, friendly hand that I had to take "Always happy to meet Bill's friends, Ed. Lunch is almost ready. You'll stay and eat with us, won't you?"

"Afraid I won't have time, Mrs. Haberman," I said.

And then Haberman spared me further embarrassment by opening a door that led down the steps into the cellar, and starting down. "Come on," he called. "We haven't much time."

I made excuses to his mother and followed him down, closing the door behind me.

He'd already flicked on the light. It was a big roomy cellar, quite clean. There was a little bar at one end of it and the other end had been fixed into a small gym. There was canvas on the floor, a rack of barbells and Indian clubs, a horizontal bar, four pair of boxing gloves hanging on one wall.

He was peeling off his coat and I took mine off too. We rolled up our sleeves.

"Gloves?" he asked me.

"I don't care."

He took two pair off the wall and tossed one of them to me. "We'll use these light ones, then," he said. "You box?"

"A little. I'm not an expert."

"Good. Neither am I. I wrestled-in college, but I haven't done much boxing, so we're even except I got five or ten pounds on you, and you're the one that asked for it."

I pulled on the gloves. They were rigged with elastic laces so they didn't need tying. He had his on before I did and stood waiting. "Okay," he said. "Now go ahead and finish that swing." He was grinning, I had too much sense, of course, to try a roundhouse swing like the one I'd missed with out on the lot. I jabbed out with my left instead. It caught his chin, but lightly; he was moving away from it.

At long range, I had a hunch, he could outbox me, so I stepped in, slugging. He didn't give this time; he slugged back. His defense wasn't good and neither was mine; we were both connecting with most punches.

He hadn't lied about not being an expert boxer; we were fairly evenly matched. I had the satisfaction of knocking the grin off his face with a hook to his mouth but then one caught me below the ribs and dead center and doubled me over; I literally saw stars when a glove exploded in my left eye. I backpedaled a few seconds before I went in again. This time he gave ground and I followed in, but not recklessly. I got one square in his breadbasket and heard him grunt from it, but it didn't bend him over; I got another looping left square in his mouth and a right that grazed his chin and might have ended the scrap if it had been a square hit because it had my weight behind it.

But I was swinging high and didn't even see the upper-cut coming that got my chin with his weight behind it.

I was flat on the floor when I opened my eyes and he was bending over me. He'd pulled his gloves off and mine too.

"You all right?" he asked. He sounded as though he was really worried about it. I pushed myself up to a sitting position and waggled my jaw with my fingers. It hurt plenty but it wasn't broken. I saw that blood was trickling down his chin from a cut on his lower lip.

I shook my head to clear it and felt all right again, more or less. I said, "Sure, I'm okay. Give me a minute and we'll try another round. I didn't see that one coming."

He stood up. "Nuts. You were out cold almost a minute; you're not going to be in shape for any more today. Come on back tomorrow if you want some more. How'd you like a shot of whisky?"

He didn't hate me so much, now that he'd knocked me out. Funny, I didn't hate him so much either. The fight—win or lose—had done me good. And a shot of whisky sounded like a wonderful idea. I said so.

He walked over to the bar at the other end of the cellar. "Coming, or shall I bring it?"

"Coming," I said. I got to my feet and I wasn't dizzy, although I felt weak and my legs felt like rubber tubing! I had to concentrate, when I walked, to keep my knees from buckling.

He had two shots of whisky and two chasers on the little bar by the time I got there. We drank and it put a warm spot inside of me and I felt better, mentally and physically both.

He looked at me and laughed, but it wasn't an unpleasant laugh. "Pal, you're going to have a shiner."

"Your lip's nothing to brag about," I told him. "It's bleeding and it's going to swell. If you got a styptic pencil, you'd better use it. And wash your chin."

"Sure, thanks." He went to a sink in the corner and opened a medicine cabinet above it. He called back to tell me to pour another shot if I wanted one, but I didn't.

I went back to where we'd thrown our coats over the horizontal bar and put mine on. I said, "Mind if I cut out the door to the outside instead of going through the kitchen again?"

"Okay, if you want. But wait a minute. I want to tell you something to tell Sally."

"Good Lord," I said. It hadn't occurred to me. "Didn't you know Sally's dead?"

He turned slowly toward me and I saw his face change. He didn't have to answer the question.

I walked over toward him. "Look," I said, "we got off on the wrong foot. I don't know who you thought I was or what I wanted, but it was my fault. I thought you knew."

"I didn't. I hadn't seen Sally for three weeks and—His voice trailed off. "Well, we'd broken things off. I guess there was no reason for her family's

letting me know, and I didn't see it in the papers or hear it from anybody. Damn, I'm sorry to hear that."

He meant it, too; he wasn't exaggerating but he wasn't faking, either.

I said, "She died last Thursday night. There's—there's suspicion that her death wasn't natural. I'm investigating the case.

"Good God. And I thought—I thought Sally sent you to see me. Either to threaten a breach of promise or to try to talk me into—Hell, it doesn't matter what I thought. What can I—"

The door at the head of the stairs opened and Mrs. Haberman's voice called down, "Bill, lunch is ready. And can't you persuade your friend to stay?"

"He'll stay, Mom," Bill Haberman called back. "We're cleaning up now; be up in a minute."

He spoke to me in a lower voice. "Look, I want to talk to you plenty. Eat with us and then we'll come back down here and talk. Don't say anything about it while we're up there. You're just a friend of mine, as far as Mom or Dad's concerned."

"Okay," I said. "Maybe I'd better wash up a little."

I saw in the mirror in front of the medicine cabinet that he was right about that shiner; it was going to be a dilly.

We went upstairs and ate a wonderful lunch, the first good home cooking I'd had in a long time. Mr. Haberman had come in to eat, too; he sat at a window so he could watch the lot and would see if anyone came into it to look at a car. Mom Haberman introduced me as a friend of Bill's and we shook hands and it was all very chummy and I felt silly as hell for the way things had started off. Especially when Mom looked at my eye and Bill's lip and bawled Bill out for playing too rough.

After lunch Bill made excuses for both of us, borrowed a car off the lot and drove us toward the lake. As soon as we'd started he said, "I've been itching to ask you for details, but I didn't want to bring it up in front of Mom."

"Why not?" I asked him. "Didn't she know you were going with Sally?"

"Oh, sure. She'd met Sally and liked her. She knew we were engaged or practically engaged. For some reason—I'm not too sure why myself—I didn't want to tell Mom the real reason for our breaking up. I just told her Sally had fallen for someone else and had given me the brush-off."

"And what really did happen between you?"

"Well—I did the breaking off. I found out she was—well, maybe not actually crazy, but off the beam. A psycho. I liked her a hell of a lot, but—well, you can't blame me for deciding I didn't want to marry her.

"I guess not," I admitted. "But did you break completely? Couldn't you have stayed friends?"

He shook his head slowly. "Wouldn't have been fair to either of us. With things as far as they'd gone, a clean break was the only answer. For Sally's sake more than mine. It wouldn't have been fair for me to keep leading her on if I didn't intend to marry her. But tell me when did Sally die? Where? How?"

I realized I'd have to give a little information to get some. I gave him as little as I could and still make sense. I told him where and when she'd died and didn't mention that I'd been there. I didn't say anything about Dorothy. I just told him that we had a client—and that I couldn't tell him who it was—who'd suspected that Sally might have been deliberately frightened to death and had hired our agency to investigate.

And then I dived back into my own questioning before he could press me for any details. "How long have you known Sally?"

"About four months. Met her at a party. We had only a few dates for a month or so after that, and then started to get serious and—well, we were practically engaged, I guess. Anyway, we'd talked about getting married, although neither of us was in a hurry about it."

"And then you found out she was psychotic?"

"Yes. About—of all screwy things—Martians. And the funny thing is, she'd talked about them off and on all along and I'd thought she was kidding and had kidded along with her. And then, about a month ago, I found out she *wasn't* kidding."

"Was she afraid of them?"

"Huh? No, she thought they were friendly, that there were Martian agents operating here in disguise, but that they were trying to help us. Help us do what, I don't know. I think she picked up the idea from that crackpot uncle of hers, the one that drinks and gambles."

"You broke with her a month ago, then?"

"Well; maybe three weeks ago. I thought it over for a week, and I tried to talk her into having mental treatment, but she flatly refused, and I saw the only thing to do was make a clean break. It hurt both of us, but it's the only thing to do."

"She took it all right?"

"Well—as near all right as I'd dared to hope she would. I don't say she was happy about it, but what else could I do?"

I said, "Nothing, I guess."

"Look, I don't know what makes anybody think Sally might have been killed. She didn't have any money or anything, did she? And who'd have wanted to kill her?"

"I don't know," I said. "But somebody thinks she *might* have been killed, enough to have hired us to investigate. Do you know her family, by the way?"

"I've met them. Sally took me out there a time or two while we were going together. Her sister's almost a dead ringer for Sally. The Stantons I liked all right, except the kid. But I didn't go for that screwball uncle of hers. Say, is he your client? If he is, then the idea that Sally didn't die naturally is probably out of marihuana."

"Literally? You mean he uses it?"

"Not that I know of. I just meant he's screwy as a bedbug and drinks like a fish."

I remembered something he'd said before that I hadn't followed up. "And you said he gambles. Did Sally mention that?"

"Not that I remember. I happened to find out myself, accidentally, one night about—let's see, about six weeks ago. Couple of fellows I went to college with were in town and looked me up. We went out together, stag, and they wanted to find some gambling. I don't go in for it much myself and didn't know any place, but they talked a taxi driver into taking them to a joint. It was a road-house called the Silver Spoon, a little outside the county. There was a gambling room with wheels and crap tables, big money stuff. I played light, just to play along, and got by cheap for fifty bucks. One of my friends dropped almost a thousand and the other several hundred—but they've got money; they could afford it. But anyway I saw Ray Wernecke there and he was making a killing.

"How much?"

"He said eight thousand."

"You talked to him then."

"Yes. He was pretty drunk but he recognized me and asked me to have a drink—after he cashed out—and I had one with him in the bar. He said he'd started in with only a hundred bucks and shooting only ten a throw—this was at the crap table—and had kept doubling up till he was shooting their limit, a thousand. He'd made I forget how many straight passes. Then he played about even awhile and started making straight passes again. He said he'd run it up to twelve thousand and then lost four thousand of it in four throws and figured his run was over so he cashed in."

"Did he get it in thousand-dollar bills?"

"Yes, I saw him stuffing them into his wallet while we were going into the bar."

I whistled softly. I asked, "Did you tell Sally about this?"

"No. He asked me not to mention it to anyone, and I didn't. There wasn't any special reason to tell Sally about it."

"Did you stay with him the rest of the evening?"

"Hell, no. He had three drinks while I was having one and he was getting sloppy drunk. I hate sloppy drunks. Besides, I was with these friends of mine and I wanted to get them out of there before they lost their shirts."

I said, "Thanks, Bill. You've given me something. I don't know what it is or how it fits in, but thanks. And look—I'm sorry I was on the prod when I met you. I started wrong and I don't blame you for telling me to peddle my papers. Could you drop me off at the North Shore Station?"

"Sure. Listen, if there's anything I can do—"

I said, "You've done it. And thanks for the sore jaw and the black eye. I needed them worse than what you told me."

He laughed. "Any time, Ed. Only next time we'll use the big gloves instead of the light ones." I told him it was a date.

Bill dropped me at the North Shore Station. Before I even thought about

taking a train I found a phone booth and called Frank Bassett.

I said, "This is Ed Hunter, Frank. Listen, about that thousand-dollar bill you traced to the operator of a gambling place outside the county. Was the place called the Silver Spoon?"

"I don't know offhand, Ed. The guy's name is Chojnacki, but I don't know the name of the place he runs. Hold the line a minute; I'll see if anybody around here knows."

I held the line a minute and he came back. "That's it, Ed. A roadhouse called the Silver Spoon. I take it you know who your client is now. Wernecke?"

"He made a killing at the Silver Spoon about six weeks ago," I said. "Got paid off in thousands."

"I thought it had to be him, Ed. I just couldn't picture Stanton either having a thousand or handling the deal with you that way, even if he did have it. Did Wernecke take them bad?"

"About eight thousand."

"That's not peanuts, although it wouldn't break a guy like Chojnacki, or even bend him. Well, happy hunting, Ed. You've found your client, anyway."

I caught a North Shore train in to the Loop and went right to the office, on the chance that Uncle Am was back and would be there. He wasn't. I called our rooming house and asked Mrs. Brady, our landlady, if he'd showed up there. He hadn't.

It was about half past two by then and I didn't have anything lined up until six, when I was supposed to phone Monica to see if she'd fixed the double date with Sally's friend from the insurance company.

I still had to figure out how Sally could have been killed. If I couldn't get that, nothing else mattered; the whole thing boiled down to nothing. I sat down and tried to think; I deliberately didn't let myself wonder where Uncle Am was and what he was doing. If he'd thought he had an angle, that was his business. He'd said that finding out how Sally had died was my department and I wanted to have the answer for him when he got back. No matter what he found out, it wouldn't mean anything without that.

I got out my reports again and reread them, especially the one that covered the night of Sally's Death. There wasn't anything in them that hadn't been there before. When I put them back in the safe, the thousand-dollar bill was still there.

Something dangled down or pushed up the airshaft had been the only idea I'd had the only possibility. And it hadn't been dangled down. I'd convinced even myself that the apartment above Sally's hadn't been used nor the roof.

Korbytsky or the mailman. The two apartments below.

I didn't know which seemed the more ridiculous. I couldn't suspect Korbytsky any more than I suspected Eleanor Roosevelt. And Uncle Am had met both the mailman and his wife and had given them a clean bill of health, and I respected Uncle Am's judgment. And he agreed with me on Korbytsky.

Nuts, I told myself, forget Korbytsky and forget the mailman and his wife. Forget the airshaft. *Think*.

I tried to think.

I remembered that I sometimes do my best thinking in a movie, particularly if I don't like the picture that's playing.

It was worth a try. I went out and walked over to South State Street, where there are plenty of cheap movies that play cheap pictures or occasionally reruns of good pictures. The first one I passed was playing a rerun of Hedy Lamarr in *Ecstasy*. I'd seen it twice before, way back when, but I was afraid it might still distract me. Afraid? I knew damn well it would.

The next theater was perfect. A B-gangster picture and a B-western, neither of them starring anybody I'd ever heard of. I bought a ticket and went in.

I sat through a couple of hours of it and although guns kept going off I still don't know if they were gangster guns or cowboy guns; although my eyes watched the screen they didn't see anything. I sat there trying to think and beating my head against a stone wall.

I was surprised to find it was only five o'clock when I came out. Still daylight. Still hot. Still too early to phone Monica; she was just leaving work.

The date, if any, wouldn't be a dinner date, so I killed time by eating. I killed a little more time by walking back to the office to phone from there, and to be sure Uncle Am wasn't back yet. He wasn't.

I phoned Monica. The date was on. Her date was to pick her up at her apartment at eight o'clock; I was to be there at the same time and the three of us would pick up Charlotte Andrews, who, luckily, also lived on the Near North Side, not too far away.

She said, "Now let's keep our stories straight. You knew Sally, but not very well; you'd met her a few times..."

"I hadn't dated her. You met her through me, about four months ago. You're a student at the University of Chicago, studying—well, either psychology or psychiatry. Can you talk it?"

"How smart is the gal?"

"Not."

"Then I can talk it. Has she got buck teeth?"

"How did you find out?"

I said, "I get around. How about your date? I mean, does he know anything about what the score is?"

"No. Not a thing."

"Has *he* got buck teeth?"

"No. But listen, Ed, he does have a hare lip. You—you won't say anything about it, will you?"

"Say anything about it? What do you think I am, Monica?"

"I just—Well, he's pretty sensitive about it, that's all. I thought I'd be sure to warn you, Ed. I know you wouldn't hurt anybody's feelings, but—"

"Don't be silly. See you tonight at eight, then. And thanks, Monica."

I went home to clean up a bit for the evening. And since I had some time to kill I remembered that we had a copy of the Modern Library's *An Outline of Abnormal Psychology* in the book case so I spent half an hour with it, picking up a bit of gobbledegook so I could make like a psychiatrist-to-be with anyone who knew less about it than I did.

I timed it nicely and got to Monica's at exactly the stroke of eight.

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Chapter 13

MONICA HAD been kidding me about her date's having a hare lip. He was tall, blond and plenty handsome, and he was dressed better than I, although I'd put on my best suit and a new white shirt I'd never worn before. His name was Harvey Wells and he seemed like a fairly nice guy. I wondered if he and Monica were serious about each other, and then I wondered why I'd wondered that.

Monica, dressed—but not overdressed—for the evening, looked like a million bucks in one small package.

She was ready when I got there and she and Harvey were just finishing a cocktail. Monica wanted to make me one but I suggested we pick up Charlotte Andrews first and then I'd buy us a round while we decided where we were going for the evening. I didn't get any argument and we left right away.

Charlotte Andrews turned out to be not as bad as I'd pictured her, physically. Within minutes I knew that she was a chatterbox and that I was going to end the evening with a tin ear, but for my purpose that was fine, as long as I could keep her talking about Sally.

We went for cocktails to a place just around the corner, and never left it. The drinks were good, there was dancing—to a juke box that wasn't loud enough to drown out conversation—and when, around midnight, we all got hungry, the food turned out to be good too.

Monica kept her date out of the way most of the time by dancing with him, but it wouldn't have mattered; the questions I kept feeding Charlotte about Sally could have been asked and answered in front of him. He might have decided eventually that I was a monomaniac on the subject of Sally Doerr, but that wouldn't have mattered either.

It was a nice evening but by one o'clock, when Charlotte got sleepy, I knew it had been a wasted one. I had an amazing volume of information about Sally but none of it seemed to be relevant or helpful in the slightest. I knew where she bought her stockings and what she paid for them, what she liked to do on dates and who her favorite movie stars were. Charlotte had known Sally's family slightly and had met Bill Haberman, but what she could tell me about them merely confirmed things I already knew and added nothing of possible importance.

Monica and Harvey Wells left when we did; they took a cab and I walked back around the corner with Charlotte and left her at her door.

I walked on home, hoping Uncle Am would be back, but he wasn't. He

hadn't been in and out again, either; the things he'd taken with him were still gone.

I went to bed and I was too tired to think; I went to sleep the second my head hit the pillow and slept soundly until the alarm went off in the morning.

I knew I couldn't take any office-sitting, so I didn't even go there. And because I didn't want to make a morning call on the Stantons I figured out one more useless thing to do. I went out to the University of Chicago and made inquiries about Dorothy. I talked to several of her instructors, especially her psychology prof, whom I was lucky enough to catch in a period in which he didn't have a class. And I learned a few things, but they were things I'd already been pretty sure of. They pointed, but they didn't prove.

That killed the morning. I phoned the office to be sure that Uncle Am wasn't back, then ate lunch and phoned again. No answer.

During lunch I'd had a brand-new thought that I knew wasn't any good at all, but I thought I'd check and get it off my mind. I went back to Korbytsky, the landlord, and asked him who had rented Sally's apartment. He told me it was a woman who'd just come to Chicago from Cleveland, that she'd told him she'd worked for the Y.W.C.A. there and that she'd come to Chicago three days before to take a job with some social organization here; he didn't remember which one. He gave me her name.

It didn't look like anything but I went back to the office and wasted a few bucks on a long distance call to the Cleveland Y. W. The story checked forty ways for Sunday, which was the day she'd left the Cleveland Y. W., where she'd lived as well as worked.

So that was that. Not that I'd expected anything. I drew a picture diagram of Sally's apartment on the blotter of the desk and stared at it awhile. There wasn't any way Sally could have been killed.

I knew I'd go crazy if I kept thinking about it. I decided I'd left the Stantons alone long enough. I phoned their number and Gerald Stanton answered. I said I was sorry for bothering him, but when could I talk to him again?

"This evening, if you wish, Mr. Hunter. Dorothy's funeral is this afternoon. Ah—we'd be pleased to have you there if you care to come."

I stalled. "I don't know whether I can make it or not. Where and at what time?"

He named a mortuary parlor and the address—the same one from which Sally's funeral had been held. "The funeral will be at three o'clock. Thank you for the roses you and your uncle sent; they were very beautiful."

I don't know why he thanked us; the roses had been for Dorothy. But I was glad Uncle Am had remembered to send them.

I told him I'd come to the funeral if I could make it and that if I didn't see him there I'd see him at home between eight and eight-thirty in the evening—if he was sure he wouldn't mind talking to me again so soon after the funeral. He said he was sure.

After the call I looked at my wrist watch and saw that it was a quarter after two. Just time for me to get to the funeral.

If I wanted to go to it.

I didn't want to, but I couldn't, for a moment, figure anything more constructive to do.

Then, just as I was leaving the office, I thought of something.

I was a little afraid, but the minute I thought of it, I knew I was going to do it. At least, if I could do it without having to break down a door. And I didn't think I'd have to; I was pretty sure that I remembered noticing that the door of Stantons' apartment had opened with an old-fashioned skeleton-type key.

And from three until at least four, none of them would be there.

I got a ring of skeleton keys from the drawer of the desk and started right away; if I took the elevator, my arrival would time itself just about right.

It did. It was five minutes after three when I went up the stairs to the door of their apartment. Without trying the door I made sure I'd been right about the type of lock and looked through the keyhole to make sure there wasn't a key in it from the inside.

For extra precaution, I rang the doorbell and waited a full minute before I reached into my pocket for the ring of keys.

And then I froze with my hand there, for the door clicked and was swinging open, inward.

Pulling it open was the most frightful thing I'd ever seen in my life.

A little man about four feet high with a bright orange face, a huge mouth with huge white teeth. He was dressed all in white. He had something in his hand that looked like a gun except that it flared into a coil of wire at what would have been the muzzle. It was aimed dead center at my stomach.

It was probably the worst scare I'd ever had. There were a lot of things that I could have done; I could have screamed and run, or fainted, or tried a grab for the weapon, or raised my hands.

Luckily, my sanity returned before I'd decided which one of them to do, so I did none.

I said, "Hello. Are you Dickie Stanton?"

He giggled and took off the orange false face. "Yeah," he said. "Bet I scared you. Who are you?"

"Ed Hunter," I said. "Are your parents home?"

"Oh, you're the detective. Come on in; the coast is clear."

He stepped back—just an eleven-year-old boy now, in white pajamas, with an orange pumpkin false face in one hand and a homemade Buck Rogers ray gun in the other.

He wasn't a Martian after all.

He was slender and smallish for his age, but he had bright, intelligent eyes. Amused eyes—and that amusement in them had aged me considerably in a fraction of a second. For a dime I'd have turned him over my knee and paddled his bottom to change the expression on his face. But nobody offered

me a dime, and, anyway it would hardly have been politic. I went in and closed the door behind me.

"I got a bad cold," Dickie said. He sniffled to prove it. "So they left me home to stay in bed. But say, if you're Ed Hunter why'd you ask for my parents? You know where they are; I heard Pop talking to you over the phone and telling you when and where the funeral is. Know what I'd bet?"

"What would you bet?"

"Bet you came here to break in and case the joint because you thought everybody'd be at the funeral. You had your hand in your pocket and I'll bet you were reaching for a key to try on the door. Only it wasn't locked. And you didn't wait long enough after ringing the bell because I had time to get out of bed and get my mask and ray gun. Bet you thought I was a Martian!"

I stared at him, wondering how one person could have become so objectionable in only eleven years. I saw now, and clearly, why Sally hadn't hiked him.

He laughed. "It's all right. I won't give you away. Maybe I'm going to be a detective myself some day. Only not a dumb one. I'll be a scientific detective, because I'm going to be a scientist anyway, and solve things in laboratories. So I won't tell on you. Sit down awhile."

"If you're supposed to be in bed with that cold—" I said.

"Aw, it isn't that bad. I mean, I really got a cold but I let them think it was worse than it is because I just didn't want to go to the funeral. I don't like funerals. Do you?"

"I'm not crazy about them."

"I'm not either. Sure, I suppose I should have gone because I liked Dotty, but she isn't going to know whether I was there or not. I don't believe, like Mom, in people turning into angels and going to Heaven when they die. That's a lot of bunk. Don't you think so, too?"

"I don't know," I said. "But if your parents told you to stay in bed—"

"Aw phooey. I was in bed reading, but I'm not going back now, and *you're* not going to tell on me if I don't. You can't even admit you were here at a time when you knew they were gone. And I've always wanted to talk to a detective—even if he isn't a scientific one. Do you have to kill people often?"

"Not as often as I'd like to," I told him. He'd walked into that one. He got what I meant, too, and grinned at me.

"Do you carry a gun?" he wanted to know.

"No. Not ordinarily, anyway. Is that one of yours really a ray gun?"

He laughed again. "Bet I can invent a real one when I grow up and know more about electronics. But this one really shoots rubber bands, and I'm pretty good with it. Watch."

He aimed it at the shade of a floor lamp at the other side of the room—I noticed that it was the lamp Mrs. Stanton had brought home from Sally's apartment—and pulled the trigger. A rubber band plinked against the shade, dead center. The kid was a natural-born marksman; with a real gun I'd have

had to sight a bit more carefully than he'd done to get in as accurate a shot.

"Good shooting, huh?" he said. "Want to try it?"

I said I didn't.

"How'd you like to take a look at my laboratory?"

I wasn't crazy about the idea, but I had to keep on the good side of him, up to a point, or have an embarrassing explanation to make to Mr. Stanton.

So I nodded. I said, "But just a minute first, Dickie. I want to ask you something. Do you make a habit of scaring people—like you scared me? And I'll admit you did scare me, if that makes you any happier."

"Naw, not often. Once in a while. But I know better than to scare Pop; his heart isn't so good. You don't scare anybody with a bad heart, like Pop or Sally."

"Did you ever scare Sally?"

"Once, before I knew. But it nearly killed her, so I didn't do it again. Anyway, Sally was a little screwy. So was Dotty, but not so bad."

"Did you like them, Dickie?"

"Oh, we got along all right, especially Dotty. Only I'm interested in the physical sciences and she was interested in the mental ones, like Uncle Ray is. I think they're a lot of bunk, mostly. Come on, let me show you my lab."

I followed him, and it really was a laboratory that he led me to. At least it took up half a room and was quite a laboratory for an eleven-year-old. The other half of the room was his bedroom.

"Look, this corner is my detective lab. Fingerprint powders, a microscope—of course I use that for other things too—and here's an ink slab and cards for taking fingerprints of suspects and criminals. Want me to take your fingerprints?"

"Thanks, no," I said. "I might need them sometime. Look, when you grow up come around to see us; we might be able to give you a job."

That was a safe enough offer, and even a good bet. If he was still the way he was at eleven, it would give me a chance to knock his ears off. A pleasure you have to deny yourself with an eleven-year-old kid.

"Sure," he said. "Or I'll help you any time you want, meanwhile. I solved a crime once already."

"You did? What kind of crime?"

"Larceny. Somebody took five dollars from my bank a year ago. It got put back a few days later, but I wanted to know who did it if it happened again, so I coated the bills—there were five ones—with a chemical stuff that turns your skin green if you touch it and it won't wash off; you just have to let it wear off. And a few weeks later the money was gone again, and Mom's fingers were green."

"Mother's little helper," I said. "If you were my kid—"

"But I'm not. Look, that's my chem lab over there on that bench, and this is my electrical stuff. This is a Leyden jar. Know what a Leyden jar is?"

He picked up a bottle from the table; it was covered halfway up, inside and

outside, with tinfoil and it had a brass knob on top. He was coming toward me with it when I remembered.

“No you don’t,” I said. “You’re not going to give me an electric shock with that thing. I had that tried on me in high school physics class. I forget how it works, but it gives you a shock.”

He grinned. “Sure, but it don’t hurt you. It’s a condenser. The glass is a dielectric between the two sheets of tinfoil; you build up a positive charge on the outside and a negative one on the inside. And then if you touch the outside sheet and the knob on top that’s connected to the inside one, you release the charge and get a shock. You can make a spark with it, too.”

He pointed to a little machine with a wheel and a handle. “That’s the static electricity generator you charge the Leyden jar with. I work with radio, too. Made my own set so I can listen to programs in here by myself. But Pop won’t buy me the parts to try television, not till my next birthday.”

“How are you on nuclear physics?” I asked him. “If I sent you around a critical quantity of plutonium, could you make an atom bomb?”

“Sure, that’s easy—if you got the plutonium. But if it’s enough for critical mass, you better send it in two packages instead of one. But even if you could get plutonium, you couldn’t afford it.”

Very true, I thought, ‘and a damned good thing, because otherwise I might be tempted.

I looked at my watch and it was half past four. “What time are your parents coming back?” I asked him.

“They’re going to the cemetery after the chapel service; so’s Uncle Ray. I don’t guess they’ll be back till at least half past five. So you don’t have to hurry.”

“It’s not a question of hurrying,” I said. “I just can’t wait that long. You see, I made a mistake about the time; I thought I was getting here before they’d be leaving for the funeral. My watch stopped because I forgot to wind it this morning.”

“Let’s see it.”

I grinned at him. “Not on your life, Rollo. That’s my story and I stick to it—in case you should decide to cross me up and tell your parents I came here while they were gone. It’s my word against yours about that watch and you’d be surprised how good I am at sticking to a story. I go now.” I went.

It was still hot outside and I was annoyed with myself and circumstances and with Dickie Stanton. I decided that a cold beer might cool me off. I walked back to Lunt Avenue and along it until—I came to a bar, about three blocks from the el.

I went in and got my beer, and everything was cool and comfortable and air-conditioned.

But I felt lousy.

I wished that Uncle Am was back and I hoped to hell that he had something because I didn’t. Nothing.

Oh, sure, I knew who had killed both girls and I knew how both murders were committed, but there wasn't a way on earth of proving either one.

And when I thought of Sally and Dorothy—especially of Dorothy—I knew that I was on the ragged edge of committing a murder myself. Of taking the law into my own hands and acting on knowledge that I could never prove.

Even if I knew the motive.

I sat there thinking of Dorothy's beautiful body as it had preceded me down to the water—and as I had seen it next, a corpse on the moonlit sand.

I thought of Sally and her poor psychopathic fears—and of the calm faith in me with which she'd gone to bed that night, serene in the belief that I was guarding her, after she'd cried when she thought that I was going to leave.

I'd failed both of them—and now I was failing them again because I knew and I couldn't prove. There simply wasn't any way it could be proved, ever.

A murderer had got away with murder, and there wasn't anything I could do about it.

I remembered that it had been a couple of hours now since I'd checked on Uncle Am. He'd said he'd be gone a day or so, and it was almost two days now.

I went back to the phone booth and called the office. No answer.

I tried our rooming house. No answer there, either, although I told the operator to keep on ringing for a while, so that if Uncle Am was up in our room he'd have time to get downstairs to the phone.

I went back to my beer and brooded some more.

Then some damned fool dropped a nickel into the juke box and it started blaring out a hillbilly ballad and I got out of there.

Chapter 14

IT WAS six o'clock and I was getting hungry but I walked south toward town for a long way before I stopped to eat. I wanted to get myself out of that neighborhood. I picked the best-looking restaurant I could find, but the food tasted like sawdust to me.

I took a cab home. Uncle Am wasn't there.

I wandered around the room a little and then I got a thirty-eight automatic out of the dresser drawer and cleaned and oiled it. I loaded the clip and jacked a cartridge into the chamber, and then put down the gun while I took off my coat to strap on the shoulder holster. But when I got my coat off I saw what a crazy thing I was doing and thinking and I put the gun and the holster back into the drawer.

I thought, damn Uncle Am; I wish he'd get back or phone or something.

I went over and looked out of the window awhile into the gathering darkness. Clouds were rolling in from over the lake and the heat wave was being broken by a light shower, just enough to wet the street and make it glisten. I opened the window wider to let more cool air into the room; I could hear the slither of tires as cars went by.

There was a knock at the door and I went across and opened it.

Mrs. Brady stood there. She said, "Phone call for you, Ed. I been calling you but you didn't hear."

"Sorry," I said. "Had the window open and was standing there. I guess the noises from the street—Is it Uncle Am?"

"Yes."

I had a hunch I might be going right out, so I got my coat and hat before I went downstairs to answer the phone. I didn't take the automatic; it might not be safe for me to carry it. And, anyway, I had my hands.

Uncle Am's voice said, "Hi, kid. How go things?"

"Lousy. Where are you?"

"Airport. You mean you haven't figured out—what you were working on?"

I said, "I figured it out all right, this afternoon. I know which door it was for Sally, but I can't prove it"

"Which door?"

"I mean I know how she was killed. And I know how Dorothy was killed. I know Wernecke killed them. But there's no proof, no evidence."

"Swell, Ed," Uncle Am's voice sounded as though he meant it. "Nice going. We won't need proof, on that. As long as you *know* how the girls were

killed, everything's under control. Listen, we're taking a cab from here right to the Stantons'. Meet us there, huh? You'll get there sooner, but wait outside, watch that Wernecke doesn't leave till we get there."

"Who's we?"

"Me and Uncle Sam. You can stop Wernecke, can't you?"

I said, "I'd love it. But what's the—"

The phone clicked in my ear.

I went outside into the cool, clean evening and started looking for a cab. I was lucky; despite the light rain I found one within a block.

I had it park in front of the building next to the one the Stantons lived in and waited inside it until another cab pulled up in front of us and Uncle Am and two tall heavy-set men got out of it. Uncle Am motioned me over and made introductions; the two Feds were named Bascomb and Selig.

The four of us went upstairs and Bascomb did the knocking.

Stanton answered the door. He opened it wide when he recognized Uncle Am and me in the party. We went in. Bascomb asked for Wernecke, and Stanton, his eyes wide, motioned toward a door. "In there," he said. "Shall I —?"

"We'll get him, thanks."

Bascomb and Selig went through the door. In seconds they came out with Ray Wernecke between them. He walked straight and looked straight ahead, at none of us. He looked sober. Very sober. They went out, the three of them.

"Shocking technique," Uncle Am said. "Take 'em quick, ask no questions, tell 'em nothing except to show the warrant. Sometimes they're so scared they talk before the questioning even starts." He looked at Stanton. "You knew?"

Gerald Stanton sank back into a chair behind him. "I—suspected. But—why? I couldn't see any reason. I—I don't think he was—is—insane. Why did he kill Sally and Dorothy, and how?"

"The Colorado property," Uncle Am said. "It's full of Geigers; I watched a United States geologist count them with a Geiger counter. You're rich, Mr. Stanton, or you will be after you sell that property to the Government. Uranium is kind of in demand right now."

"But—how——?"

Uncle Am sat down on the sofa. He said, "Sit down, Ed. There's a bit to it, and then you're going to have to explain to both of us about the girls. I'm still in the dark on that, myself."

I sat on the arm of a chair and stared at him. "I thought you said you weren't going to Colorado."

"Didn't know I was. I went to El Paso first. While you were at Sally's place Tuesday evening I got the bright idea that I wanted to talk to Jack Silver, the geologist who made the survey. Despite the fact that it was supposed to be worthless, that property seemed the only possible motive, and it kept haunting me. So I phoned El Paso and found his phone had been disconnected some time ago. And when I checked when it had been disconnected and found it

was about the time of the survey of that Colorado property, I decided to go to El Paso. I flew there that night.”

“I was dumb,” I said. “I should have thought of that.” “You were concentrating on a different angle, Ed. Anyway, I got to George McNally, Silver’s boss, early the next morning and found out Silver had been killed accidentally in Colorado—just after that survey. After he’d sent in a report but before he started back. Right in Seco.

I told McNally I suspected that, in that case, the report might be a forgery and we went right to the office and looked up the original and compared it with other reports of Silver. They were all hand-written; he didn’t type. And once you looked for it, it was an obvious forgery, almost an amateur job. We took it right to the Feds and—”

“Why? I mean, why Uncle Sam? Forgery isn’t a Federal charge.”

“He’d mailed the report in—or somebody had. Using the mails to defraud is Federal, and I knew we’d get quickest action on that. That’s what the warrant was for, incidentally. And that much they can make stick for sure—and for plenty of years. And Bascomb says they’ve got experts who can prove Wernecke is the one who made the forged report, if he did. And there’s no doubt of that, because he’s the only one who was with Silver, and the only one who could have killed him.”

“How did Silver die?” I wanted to know.

“Apparently of an accidental fall down a flight of steps in the little hotel in Seco that Wernecke and he went to after they came back from the survey. He and Wernecke were together at the time of the accident—but there wasn’t any reason to suspect murder then, and Wernecke’s word was taken about it being a fall down the stairs.

“What really must have happened was that Wernecke killed him when he was going out to mail the report. He took it and later made and mailed a forged one, copied with changes from the original. And as soon as the forgery—and use of the mails to defraud—is proved, Colorado’s going to extradite him for murder. If one charge stands up, it proves the others, even if the evidence for the murder is circumstantial. If they prove it’s his handwriting on the forged report, I don’t think there’s any doubt about convicting him for murder in Colorado.”

“But why he would have—” Stanton shook his head slowly.

“You mean why he would have committed three murders to get it, Mr. Stanton? The Government geologist who flew out there from Denver says it’s worth several million dollars. There are a lot of people who’ll commit several murders for several million—even better adjusted people than Wernecke.

“He didn’t dare try to buy the property from the girls—you’d have been suspicious if they weren’t. So he waited awhile and then killed them—Ed says he can tell us how. That gave the property to you and your wife, his sister. And you have a weak heart, Mr. Stanton, as Sally had. He’d have waited awhile again and then the property would have belonged to Mrs. Stanton. And

he'd have bought it from her, as a favor, when she began to need money, as she would have. She wouldn't have suspected."

"No—she wouldn't have. I hate to admit that my wife is stupid, Mr. Hunter, but—well, she is. And she trusts her brother so completely that she wouldn't have questioned anything he did. That's why, incidentally, I had to lure you the way I did. If my wife had known I suspected her brother and had hired you to investigate—Well, it would have been the end of our marriage."

I asked, "How did you get that thousand-dollar bill, Mr. Stanton?"

"From Ray, one night about six or seven weeks ago. With several others, incidentally. He came to me early one evening and said he was broke and wanted a hundred dollars to gamble with. He said he was 'hot'—that he had a hunch he was going to make a killing. He often had psychic hunches, and they often worked out. I'd just cashed a pay check, he knew, and had that much money. But I refused at first, and then he said he'd give me half of anything he won, if he won, and repay me the hundred if he lost." Stanton shrugged. "I had nothing to lose that way, so I gave it to him. He came in late that night and gave me four thousand dollars, said he'd won eight. I'll admit that surprised me; I'd have thought he'd have said he won less than that and given me less. Or possibly he won more."

I said, "Eight was the right figure. But I can guess why he split with you honestly. Bill Haberman, the guy Sally was going with at that time, happened to be there and saw him cash in. He told Haberman to keep it under his hat, but later must have figured Haberman might tell Sally anyway and that Sally might tell you, so he made an honest split."

Uncle Am looked at me, "Kid, you get around."

"It cost me this," I said, pointing to my black eye. Uncle Am grinned and said, "I'd wondered. But on you it looks good, romantic. You should wear one all the time." He turned to Stanton. "But why the Martian gag, and all the trouble you went to to put the money under our desk blotter?"

"Well—I rather hoped you'd think Wernecke was your client. I knew you'd investigate thoroughly anyway. But if everything was on the level, I'd rather you'd think he'd hired you instead of me. So, since he was always talking about Martians, I thought of that angle. I knew you'd figure it was one of us." He cleared his throat. "I was pretty good at amateur theatricals when I was younger. I can still control my voice pretty well. But—that doesn't matter now."

He turned to me. "Ed, how did Wernecke kill Sally and Dorothy? Was it—posthypnotic suggestion?"

I said, "With Dorothy, yes. It was easy for him, there; they'd been experimenting together in parapsychology, including attempts at telepathy under hypnosis. Wernecke had been with Dorothy the morning of the night she died. He gave her two easy posthypnotic suggestions—one a compulsion to go swimming that made her keep insisting on it all evening, and the other a suggestion that, once she got out in the water, she'd have the hallucination of

a raft just a little bit farther out and would want to swim to it.”

Stanton said, “I—I saw that possibility. I tried not to believe it. It helped me not to believe it that he’d never worked with Sally. She didn’t trust him and had never let him hypnotize her. How—?”

I said, “There is the weapon he used to kill Sally.” I pointed to the lamp that had stood back of the head of Sally’s bed in her apartment. “Not the lamp, just the shade. It’s copper foil on the outside and aluminum foil on the inside, with celluloid in between to act as a dielectric. It works on the principle of a Leyden jar.”

“Dickie has one.”

“And a static electricity generator to charge it. Wernecke took the generator to Sally’s apartment while she was out and put an electrical charge into the shade—built up a potential between the two sheets of metal foil. It wouldn’t have been enough of a shock to kill, ordinarily—just to give a nasty and surprising jolt. But he worked a build-up on Sally by making phone calls to convince her that Martians were going to kill her. He got her so frightened and jittery that, with her bad heart, there wouldn’t be any doubt that a sudden shock would kill her.”

I said, “She lay down on the bed that night to read, and she reached back over the head of the bed to tilt the shade of the lamp so that it would give her better light for reading. Naturally she’d touch both sides of the shade doing that—thumb on the inside and fingers on the outside, or the other way around. Of course he couldn’t be sure she’d tilt the shade that particular night, but he phoned at two o’clock to see if the phone would be answered. When I answered it instead of Sally, he hung up.”

Stanton said dully, “He gave Sally that lamp for her birthday two months ago. He must have planned it even then.”

“He’s planned it,” Uncle Am said, “ever since he and the geologist learned there was uranium on that land. Killing the geologist and forging the report was the first step, and then he waited awhile to kill the girls. And he’d probably have got away with it if it hadn’t been for the ‘premonitions’ they had. Ed, I can understand Sally’s—from the threatening phone calls—but what gave Dorothy the idea that something was going to happen to her that night?”

I said, “Wernecke didn’t intend that at all, but something about the posthypnotic suggestions he gave Dorothy must have leaked through from her subconscious mind to her conscious one. Enough to tell her that something was going to happen; she felt it strongly enough to come to us for protection.

“But about Sally; I should have suspected that lampshade because it was such an unusual one, but I didn’t. I touched it myself but of course I didn’t get a shock because a condenser with a static charge discharges itself completely the first time it’s shorted. I never thought of the possibility until I saw Dickie’s Leyden jar and his static electricity generator.”

There was silence a moment and then Uncle Am stood up too.

Stanton said, "Wait, please." He went into his study and came back with a thousand-dollar bill, a mate to the one that was in our safe at the office. "I promised you this. Uh—can you please keep the fact that I hired you from coming out? I—I still wouldn't want my wife to know it. She never knew about the four thousand I won, through Wernecke, that night. I wanted to keep it for a nest egg, for emergencies, so I never told her. It would be embarrassing if she learned now."

Uncle Am took the bill and put it into his wallet. He said, "I think we can promise you that, Mr. Stanton. I imagine this will be pretty much of a shock to Mrs. Stanton."

"I fear it will, but that can't be helped. She broke down a bit at the funeral this afternoon, and I sent her to spend the evening and night with relatives in Winnetka; she went home with them from the funeral. I'm glad she wasn't here for—what just happened."

We shook hands with him and turned down the offer of a drink. I wanted one, but not there. I wanted to get out into the cool clean night again so I could start forgetting everything that had happened.

We caught a cab and Uncle Am said, "Kid, we'd better put this grand in the safe with the other one. Tomorrow we can bank both of them. I cashed a check in Denver and I've got almost two hundred of it left; that ought to be enough for tonight. We're going to hang one on, aren't we?"

"I guess so," I said. I didn't feel very enthusiastic about it.

We went to the office and stashed the thousand-dollar bill in the safe. The phone rang just as we were leaving and Uncle Am took the call. It was Bascomb, with the good news that Wernecke had broken wide open when they'd convinced him they could prove the forgery and, through it, the first murder. He'd split right down the middle and gibbered out the whole works.

We went out, and I felt better after a few drinks. I felt still better after a few more and when, about ten o'clock, Uncle Am decided to find himself a crap game, I got an idea and phoned Monica Wright. I told her the case had broken and that I knew it was late but that she didn't have to go to work at the insurance company in the morning.

"I'll come around and pick you up," I said, "unless you've got a premonition something might happen to you."

"I—I'm afraid I have, Ed. But I'll take a chance on its not being too bad."

And, although her premonition was right, it was a long way from being too bad.

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